The New Criterion

October 1998

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Notes & Comments: October 1998

Exit "affirmative action," enter "race-sensitive admissions policies"

Now that the democratic political process in this country has at last begun to nullify some of the damaging consequences of the mandatory race-discrimination practices that for a generation have operated under the Orwellian rubric of "affirmative action," it was to be expected that die-hard liberals in high places would act to reaffirm what they regard as the justice, the necessity, and the success of this widespread experiment in social engineering.

So it is not exactly a surprise that the most elite stratum of the liberal academic establishment has responded to this democratic political process by issuing a "groundbreaking study" of what are alleged to be the happy consequences of what it no longer pleases liberals to call "affirmative action." These liberal mandarins have looked back upon their handiwork in this arena and declared it to be wonderful.

The new rubric of choice for mandatory race-discrimination practices in the elite colleges and universities is "race-sensitive admissions policies," and it has now been given a rousing defense in the form of a 472-page book written by William G. Bowen, the former president of Princeton University, and Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard University. Called *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College Admissions* (Princeton University Press, $24.95), this curious exercise in affirmative statistical analysis is said to derive from a study of "College and Beyond," a database established in 1995–97 at the Andrew Mellon Foundation, where Mr. Bowen is now president.

There can be no question about what has inspired both the creation of this database and the study that has now derived from it. While the redress of grievances is often a slow process in our democratic system, legal challenges to some of the more flagrantly unjust consequences of affirmative action in the academy have clearly been gaining momentum for well over a decade. This phenomenon may usefully be divided into two separate but obviously related developments. The first belongs to the realm of feeling and opinion, and it is characterized by the authors of *The Shape of the River* in the following passage from the book's preface:

> Many Americans are uncomfortable about the use of race as a factor in admitting students to selective colleges and professional schools. Critics have attacked the policy on several grounds. They maintain that it is wrong for universities to exclude white applicants with

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high grades and impressive test scores while accepting minority applicants with lower grades and scores. They point out that admissions officers sometimes accept minority applicants who are not disadvantaged but come from wealthier, more privileged homes and better schools than some applicants who are rejected.

The second development, which obviously grows out of the first, belongs to the realm of legal challenges to affirmative action, and of these the authors of *The Shape of the River* have little to tell us—even though it is precisely the legal challenges that have made their own book a timely publication.

It has clearly been a shock for these liberal champions of "diversity" that a majority of voters in California—one of the most racially and ethnically diverse states in the Union—decisively supported the 1996 decision of the Regents of the University of California to eliminate race as a factor in student admissions to the nine state universities. Meanwhile, a U.S. District Court ruling has brought about a similar elimination of race-discrimination practices in the University of Texas system, and state proposition initiatives along the same lines are now pending in other states. What *The Shape of the River* amounts to in this context is an effort by the authors and their colleagues at the Mellon Foundation to send in the liberal cavalry, so to speak, to rescue an experiment in social engineering that is increasingly under siege.

What, then, does *The Shape of the River* have to tell us about the consequences of affirmative action in our elite colleges and universities, which the authors prefer to call "selective" rather than elite? This is their momentous news (quoted here from their own summary of their findings): "The data show that black students who attended the more selective schools in the study were more likely to graduate, to earn advanced degrees, to earn higher salaries, and to be more satisfied with their college experience than black students with similar test scores who attended less selective schools."

In other words, what authors Bowen and Bok, availing themselves of the Mellon Foundation's super database, have proven is what we and all the world already know: that there are distinct social, professional, and financial advantages—as well as, presumably, intellectual and cultural advantages—in attending elite schools, and that blacks who are given preference over whites by "race-sensitive admissions policies" fully enjoy those advantages insofar as they can be measured by statistical polling. At the same time, however, the authors acknowledge that their "most troubling finding is that as a group, blacks have not earned as high grades as whites in selective colleges and universities, and only about half of the difference in average class rank can be attributed to differences in SAT scores, high school grades, and socio-economic status." The authors blur the issue somewhat by declaring that "The reasons for academic underperformance are not well understood." What they do not acknowledge is that this egregious record of "underperformance" has occurred in a period of shameless grade-inflation in virtually all the schools included in the study, not to mention the "dumbing down" of required courses.

Moreover, the cause of "race-sensitive admissions policies" isn't much helped by the authors' unconscionable attempt to downgrade the idea of merit. In a study running nearly five hundred pages, the authors devote fewer than ten pages to "The Meaning of 'Merit'" and even then—as the scare quotes suggest—their intention is clearly to deconstruct the meaning of merit to a point where it can no longer be invoked as a valid consideration.

In the short term *The Shape of the River* is bound to reinvigorate the partisans of af-

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firmative action and give them hope of restoring their losses and adding to their gains. But in the longer term, the shallowness of its arguments and its philosophical tautologies will render this study totally irrelevant to the phenomenon it attempts to describe. By limiting its study to black students and ignoring all other minority groups, *The Shape of the River* marks a retreat from an attempt to deal with the future, which in this area of our lives will be largely determined by patterns of immigration that are entirely omitted from this book. It ought really to have been called *An Epitaph for Affirmative Action*.

Brief lives

One of P. T. Barnum's most famous tricks was to gull credulous circus-goers with a sign that excitedly announced "This Way to the Egress!" Having just encountered a bearded lady, a sword-swallower, and five dancing elephants, people with limited vocabularies naturally assumed that yet another entertainment awaited them. But it turned out, of course, that the egress was only the egress.

There is a lot of such circus-speak surrounding "Penguin Lives," the new series of biographies being launched in January by Viking-Penguin. Underwritten by the investment banker Kenneth Lipper (hence the new imprint, Viking-Lipper), the series is edited by James Atlas, described in a press release as "the distinguished author and *New Yorker* contributor." Yes, well . . . Viking's PR people are clearly adept at attaching a questionable statement to one that is undeniable in the hope that the questionable one will get a free ride. P. T. Barnum would have admired the technique. Thus Mr. Atlas: no one doubts that he has contributed to *The New Yorker*. The press release describes the books as "succinct, beautifully written biographies that distill the essence" of their subjects. The advance proofs of the first two volumes in the series, *Crazy Horse* by the novelist Larry McMurtry and *Marcel Proust* by Edmund White, show that at least the books are succinct, i.e., short. It's the same with the statement that they are "not measured, remote works by academics; they crackle with enthusiasm and informed opinion." Again, judging by the first two volumes, we feel confident that no one will complain that they are only "measured" or academic.

In fact, the entire series has an almost comic air of politically correct gimcrackery about it. Among the announced titles are Jonathan Spence on Mao Zedong, Jane Smiley on Charles Dickens, Garry Wills on Saint Augustine, Patricia Bosworth on Marlon Brando, R. W. B. Lewis on Dante, Janet Malcolm on Chekhov, Karen Armstrong on the Buddha, Peter Gay on Mozart, and Marshall Frady on Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps the funniest pairing is Mary Gordon on Joan of Arc—one martyr to another and surely a sterling opportunity for exploiting the autobiographical possibilities of the biographer's art. There is even a sop thrown to conservatives with a volume on Andrew Carnegie by the English historian Paul Johnson.

Some of these writers really are distinguished—as, no doubt, is the fee that they are receiving for these pop bios. But with one or two exceptions, they are writing about subjects far outside their fields of expertise. What authority will Janet Malcolm, for example, bring to the subject of Chekhov? And what does it tell us about this series that it includes volumes on Dante and Marlon Brando, Mozart and Crazy Horse? It's the Chinese menu approach: one from column A, one from column B, and so on, until every recognized constituency has its quota of attention. In other words, a perfect multicultural goulash.

The forthcoming volumes on Crazy Horse and Proust are not encouraging. Mr. Mc-

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Murtry is a clever writer and accomplished storyteller. But he is quite right that "for much of Crazy Horse's life there is no record." So what he has given us is partly an attack on General George Custer (an "erratic egotist," etc.), partly a pep-talk tale about the noble Indian warrior. The result belongs more to the genre of psycho-fiction than to biography: "From the time that Crazy Horse handed over his rifle and his horses to the white officers at Fort Robinson until his death just four months later he was a confused, stressed, off-balance, and, finally, desperate man. For the first time in his life he had done something he really didn't believe in." Really? How do we know? What does it mean to say that he was "stressed"? Had his prescription for Prozac run out?

Edmund White has given us a different sort of fantasy. Mr. White is well known for a series of books describing in pornographic detail an endless series of homosexual liaisons. Hence it is no surprise that far and away the most important thing about Proust for Mr. White was his sexuality. He dilates early and often on Proust's fame and the greatness of his novel. But clearly what fascinates him about Proust was not his literary achievement but his tortured homosexuality. There are remarkably few pages on which the terms "homosexual" or "homosexuality" do not appear. And when he is not discussing sex, Mr. White loses himself in utter trivia. Consider this passage about Proust's maid Céleste:

> Céleste's great anxiety was Proust's morning coffee. It had to be ready the moment he rang for it, but the preparation took at least half an hour, since he liked the water to be dripped, drop by drop, through the grounds, in order to produce the thickest, strongest "essence" of coffee. Nor could he bear for it to be reheated, which he could detect right way by the burned taste; if Proust did not ring soon after the coffee was ready, she would have to pour it out and start the whole process all over again. Only in her bedroom and in the kitchen were the curtains ever opened. Daylight never penetrated into the other rooms. Nor could the windows be opened to air the apartment until the master went out, which was never before ten at night . . .

And on and on, swelling the pages of this slender volume with literary filler.

Many years ago James Atlas wrote a respectable biography of the poet Delmore Schwartz. It's been downhill since then —always a little cheaper, more whiny, more "pop." We won't say that his editorship of "Penguin Lives" is the absolute nadir—who knows what depths are in store?—but this ill-conceived series certainly marks a low point. Which way to the egress?

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The betrayal of liberalism: II

Rousseau & the origins of liberalism

by Roger Scruton

The modern world gives proof at every point that it is far easier to destroy institutions than to create them. Nevertheless, few people seem to understand this truth. Britain's Labor Party has embarked upon a series of "constitutional reforms" that can be relied upon to undermine the old authority of Parliament, but that will put no new authority in its place. The churches have initiated massive liturgical changes, so losing their old consolations, their old beliefs, and their old congregations without making converts among the young. From the curriculum reformers in schools to the gay activists in the military, people are engaged in revising inherited institutions in the interests of their present members, each of whom is supposed to have an equal stake in whatever church, school, brigade, or work force he belongs to. Yet no one has the faintest conception of what the long-term costs and benefits will be.

This process of revision seems eminently rational and just to those who have embarked on it. Who can stand in the way of reform, when the liberal idea requires it? Yet the fact remains that reform will easily destroy an institution, but will not reliably replace it with another one. We have seen this in the churches, in the schools, in the universities, and in government. And we shall go on seeing it for as long as the liberal consensus prevails. It is for this reason that it is always worthwhile to return to the first and greatest of the liberal reformers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose impact on modern culture and modern politics has been equalled by no other thinker of the Enlightenment. In the work of Rousseau, we discover what is really at stake in the contest between conservative and liberal in all the areas of social life where this contest can be witnessed. What is at stake is not freedom, equality, or power, but the inherited store of social knowledge.

Rousseau's discussions of the social contract, the general will, the nature of sovereignty and citizenship, the origins of inequality, and the possibility of democratic choice are of great philosophical interest. But they should be seen in the context of his work as a whole. Rousseau was not only a great philosopher; he was also a philosopher who thought through feeling and felt through ideas. All that emerges from his pen bears the stamp of an inimitable life; and if any writer were to make liberalism plausible, it would be Rousseau, who felt his way to the moral and emotional heart of it. His view of life was also a form of life, and he expressed it not only in his philosophical works, but also in an immensely influential novel—*Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*—which can be favorably compared with the only other indisputable work of art from the hand of a philosopher: Plato's *Symposium*.

In his compositions and his writings on music, Rousseau gave voice in another way and through another—though, for him,

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connected—medium to his fundamental outlook. And of course he gave to posterity, in his *Confessions*, the first and perhaps the finest example of the romantic autobiography—the noble lie in its quintessentially modern form. Add to those achievements his brilliant anticipation of the distinction between hunter-gatherer and agricultural societies; his insight into language and the depth of the scientific problem that it poses; and his profoundly original, profoundly influential, and profoundly dangerous views on education, and you quickly come to see that there is no way in which Rousseau can be adequately discussed, still less dismissed, in a single article. Nevertheless, there is a lesson to be drawn from him, which can without distortion be given in fewer words than the philosopher would ever have bestowed on a subject so important as himself.

I have already used the term "liberalism" in its modern sense—or one of its modern senses. It is not a term that Rousseau would have used; nor would he have recognized his ideas in those thinkers whom we now describe as "classical liberals." Liberalism is an intellectual tradition formed from the interplay of two political ideals: liberty and equality. Liberals differ according to whether liberty or equality is more important to them. Libertarians believe that liberty should be traded for nothing else save liberty, whereas the present-day American "liberal" tends to sacrifice liberty for equality when the two conflict. Both libertarians and egalitarians are hostile to vested authority, and this hostility often unites the two in practice, even if it is hard to reconcile them in theory. Rousseau cared passionately for both liberty and equality. But he also brought to the fore some of the deep tensions between them. He observed with disgust what people did with their freedom, and his disgust was proof of the deep inequality that set him apart from so many of his contemporaries.

True liberty, for Rousseau, is "moral liberty." It does not consist merely in a lack of obstacles. Liberty involves autonomous choice. People are free only when they can bind themselves. From this thought stems another, inherent in Rousseau, and made explicit by Kant, namely that freedom is also a submission to law: "obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty," as Rousseau wrote in *Du contrat social*. For Rousseau, a society can be free only if freely consented to, and obligations can be binding only if self-imposed. Hence, society must be founded in a contract: each person promises obedience in exchange for a like promise from everyone else. But there is a contradiction here, and Rousseau several times returns to it. The ability to promise, to commit oneself, to act autonomously—all these involve language, which in turn requires society. The autonomous agent does not exist in a state of nature: he is a social artifact. As Rousseau himself makes clear, our natural liberty is destroyed by the social contract, which puts "civil liberty" in the place of it. From civil liberty springs moral liberty, but it is only with the coming of moral liberty that we can bind ourselves by a contract. So, how can society be founded on a contract, when no contract can exist until society has been founded? Here is a potent paradox, and one which awakens in Rousseau the will to believe. We must live *as if* bound by a contract, while knowing this to be impossible.

In the work of Rousseau, we discover what is really at stake in the contest between conservative and liberal in all the areas of social life where this contest can be witnessed. What is at stake is not freedom, equality or power, but the inherited store of social knowledge.

Inequality is of two kinds—natural and artificial. Inequalities that arise in society, Rousseau believes, are limitations on freedom, both for those at the top and those at

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the bottom. The rich man becomes slave to luxury and dependent on others to serve and obey him; the poor man becomes slave to need and dependent on others to command and reward him. But again there is a paradox. In a free society, where each may pursue his projects, natural power translates into social power, and natural inequality into inequality of another kind. All social advantages stem from the interest that people have in each other. Looks, intelligence, strength, prowess, energy, liveliness, the very attachment to life—all these are unequally distributed. Yet, it is these qualities that we find most interesting, and that determine our chances in the world. To prevent social inequalities, therefore, we must ensure that people are not free to exploit their natural powers. Only a massive program of social engineering could succeed in bringing this about.

Rousseau was aware of the paradoxical nature of egalitarianism. His whole life was proof to him that natural talent leads to social distinction unless impeded by force. The human relations that most elicited his sympathy were fraught with inequality, both natural and social. The relations between Emile and his tutor, between Julie (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*) and her lover St. Preux (who is also her tutor), and between himself and the mother-figures who one by one take charge of him in the *Confessions*—all these offer living proof of the way in which social and natural inequalities feed each other. He observed how inequality is accepted and endorsed by love; and he observed the compassion that people feel, when permitted to look down on—and up at—their neighbors. Hence, the only equality that is ever dwelt upon in Rousseau's writings is that which arises when power and authority go on holiday. Such equality is, as the Swiss philosopher Jean Starobinski has written in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction* (1988)—a "holiday affair," typified by the idyll of the grape harvest in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, when all classes, released from toil by sudden abundance, gather round for a common feast.

Why was Rousseau so eager to embrace the paradoxes to which I have alluded? What in his intellectual and emotional project entailed such a *credo quia absurdum*? The question takes us to the heart of Rousseau's thinking. "J'aime mieux être homme à paradoxes qu'homme à préjugés," he wrote in *Emile*. Prejudices come from the desire to protect existing things; paradoxes from the attempt to question them. Paradox is the mark of a priori thinking—thinking from first principles in a situation where human nature has been encrusted by custom and habit. Man, in Rousseau's account, has been corrupted by society. To rediscover our freedom, we must measure every activity against its "natural" counterpart. Not that we can return to our "natural" state; the very idea of a state of nature is a philosophical abstraction. Nevertheless, in everything there is another way, an as yet undiscovered route to authenticity, which will allow us to do freely what we now do only by constraint. No existing institution should be accepted, therefore, just because it is existing. All practices and customs should be questioned, measured against an a priori standard, and amended if they fail to come up to the mark.

This thought dictates the agenda of the *Discourses* and *Du contrat social*. It is also the evident premise of *Emile*. But to understand what exactly is wrong with it, I shall consider Rousseau's views on music. For the cost of freedom and the value of tradition are most clearly visible in art.

Rousseau took a leading role in the *querelle des bouffons*—the dispute as to whether the comic opera of the Italians was preferable to the lyrical drama of Lully. And he famously ruled, in his *Lettre sur la musique française*, that there could be no such thing as French music—that the very nature of the French language poisoned the sources of melody and encouraged an artificial art, obedient to the rules of harmony alone. By this time, he had fallen out with the great composer and theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau, upon whose treatise Rousseau had drawn when composing the

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Dictionnaire de musique. Rousseau had scored a success with *Le Devin du village* ("The Village Soothsayer")—a short opera in the Italian style. He had also presented several versions of a new scheme for musical notation, which jettisons the graphic representation of musical movement and identifies notes and quantities numerically. There is something admirable in Rousseau's reckless confrontation with the musical tradition, and also in his ability to crown his philosophical objections with musical works. Yet a closer examination reveals that his contribution to the debate is not merely negative, but also wedded to negation—determined to find corruption in the surrounding musical practice precisely because it is an established practice, a reservoir of social knowledge.

The system of musical notation that Rousseau attacked is still in use. It was not the work of any one person, but the outcome of a long process of problem solving, the very same process that had produced the tradition of harmony and counterpoint and risen to such astonishing heights in the music of Couperin, Handel, and Bach. Western music could never have reached these heights without its notation, which emancipated our music from the rule of monody and improvisation and organized it around the concept of the permanent and repeatable work.

Modern liberals tend to scoff at the idea of tradition. All traditions, they tell us, are "invented," implying that they can therefore be replaced with impunity. This idea is plausible only if you take the trivial examples—Scottish country dancing, Highland dress, the Coronation ceremony, Christmas cards, and whatever else comes with a "heritage" label. A real tradition is not an invention; it is the unintended byproduct of invention, which also makes invention possible. Our musical tradition is one astounding example of this. No single person created it. Each contributor built on previous achievements, discovering problems and solving them through the steady expansion of the common syntax. Notation developed side by side with harmony and counterpoint. No single person could ever have discovered the knowledge of the human ear and the human heart that these practices contain, any more than a single person could discover a language. When Rameau came to write his *Traité de l'harmonie* ("Treatise on Harmony"), he was not inventing rules, nor recording the conventions of a game. He was attempting to summarize a body of implicit knowledge, which is in all our heads as listeners and performers, but which has no first principles, no definitions, no a priori system.

Rousseau's impatience with Rameau reflects a profound antipathy to the very idea of tradition. For a tradition, precisely because it is *not* invented, has authority. "Unintended byproducts" of invention contain more knowledge than any person can discover unaided. By attacking graphic notation, Rousseau was attempting to undermine one of the indisputable sources of authority in our society. He was attempting to show that a tradition could be disinvented and begun again, and that it could be begun again by a single, freely choosing sensibility. The attack on French music was a rehearsal for the forthcoming drama: Rousseau against prejudice, and, behind

A real tradition is not an invention; it is the unintended byproduct of invention, which also makes invention possible. Our musical tradition is one astounding example of this. No single person created it. Each contributor built on previous achievements, discovering problems and solving them through the steady expansion of the common syntax.

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that, another and deeper conflict—one that pitted the self against others, and selfhood against otherness.

Of course, the attack was a failure. Rousseau's rival system of notation makes the sight-reading of counterpoint impossible; it gives no lucid account of harmonic sequence or voice-leading. It is a match for the old notation only when representing unison melodies. This objection was made by Rameau, and Rousseau, in Book 7 of the *Confessions*, concedes the point. In the event, however, Rousseau was deterred neither by Rameau's arguments nor by his own recognition of their force. Instead he turned against Rameau and all that the composer stood for. He began to attack harmony and counterpoint as marks of corruption, and to praise unison melody as the pure voice of nature. At all costs it was necessary to show that inherited convention could be overthrown by the freely choosing spirit and that the result would be closer to nature, and morally purer, than the routines which govern others.

Of *Le Devin du village,* it should be said that its music, though not without charm, would have been rescued from triviality had the composer troubled more over harmony and counterpoint. The decorative use of parallel thirds and the plodding common chords make this music both easy to grasp and wearisome to hold. Its success at the time is no more difficult to credit than the success of Andrew Lloyd Webber today, and the score is clear proof, if proof be needed, that the tradition that Rousseau hoped to overthrow contained more knowledge than had entered his head.

Rousseau's ventures into musicology illustrate his value as a thinker. If we wish to know where authority resides, then we should look first at Rousseau's targets. He sought out real authority in order to dismiss it as a sham. Whatever institution he viewed as corrupting is likely to be a source of knowledge, and whatever he recommended in its place will be fraught with paradox. Rousseau's attack on society in the name of "nature" exemplifies what to me is the root error of liberalism in all its forms, namely, the inability to accept, or even to perceive, the inherited forms of social knowledge.

By social knowledge, I mean the kind of knowledge embodied in the common law, in parliamentary procedures, in manners, costume, social convention, and, also, in morality. Such knowledge arises "by an invisible hand" from the open-ended business of society, from problems that have been confronted and solved, from agreements that have been perpetuated by custom, from conventions that coordinate our otherwise conflicting passions, and from the unending process of negotiation and compromise whereby we quieten the dogs of war.

It was such knowledge that Edmund Burke had in mind when he attacked the a priori thinking of the French revolutionaries in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). "We are afraid to put men to live and trade on their own private stock of reason," he wrote, "because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages." Burke's imagery is in one respect misleading. Social knowledge does not accumulate as money does, nor does it grow in the manner of scientific knowledge, which can be stored in books. It exists only in and through its repeated exercise: it is social, tacit, practical, and can never be captured in a formula or plan. The best way to understand it, indeed, is through the failures of the planned economy.

The Austrian economists—for example, Ludwig von Mises in *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (1951)—argued, plausibly enough, that prices in a market contain information that is indispensable to economic life. This information exists only in the free exchange of goods and services; it is information about the real pressure of human needs. Hence the attempt to encompass economic life in a rational plan, with prices controlled from the center, will destroy the information on which the plan must draw. Rationalism in economics is ir-

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rational. Indeed, it is a living instance of the self-contradictions discovered by Rousseau whenever he searched for the first principles of human society.

The Austrian theory parallels Michael Oakeshott's attack on rationalism in politics in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1963). It can also be applied in other spheres where social knowledge is the foundation of rational conduct, as F. A. von Hayek has shown in *Law, Legislation, and Liberty* (1982). The common law, for example, contains information that could not be contained in a legislative program—information about conflicts and their resolution, about the sense of justice in action, and about human expectations, which is dispersed through the record of the law and is never available when legislation is the sole legal authority. Hence, the attempt to remake the legal order, through a legislative code that embodies all permissible solutions, is profoundly irrational. Such a code will destroy the source of legal knowledge, which is the judgment of the impartial judge as he confronts the unforeseeable course of human conflict. Rousseau's social contract leads to an abstract and a priori code, established not by the attempt to rectify injustices as they one by one arise, but by the supreme act of a Legislator who, being not God but Jean-Jacques, is destined to fail. The Legislator is the unhappy Atlas on whom the unsustainable burden of humanity falls.

Another example of implied social knowledge—and one of supreme importance in our culture—is the tradition of Western music. The musical practices that irritated Rousseau contain practical knowledge that cannot be translated into his rational notation—knowledge of the inner relations of tones and harmonies that is dispersed through a tradition of polyphonic thinking. This knowledge becomes visible, though not verbal, in our musical notation, but it is lost in Rousseau's numerical plan.

Social knowledge arises from the search over time for agreement. Even the common law, which leans on coercion, involves the attempt to find socially agreed solutions. Hence, the outcome of a case in common law is always clear: rights and liabilities are determined. But the principle—the *ratio decidendi*—may not be clear at all, and may emerge only later in the tradition of judicial reasoning. Law, custom, convention, ceremony, moral norms, and the market are the varying ways in which human beings attempt to live by agreement. The resulting social order will be marked by inequalities and constraints. How could it be otherwise?

Society, Burke pointed out, is an open-ended partnership between generations. The dead and the unborn are as much members of society as the living. To dishonor the dead is to reject the relation on which society is built—the relation of obligation between generations. Those who have lost respect for their dead have ceased to be trustees of their inheritance.

But it will arise, in the normal case, from transactions freely engaged in. If transactions are coerced, then the resulting conventions and norms will not contain the knowledge that is so important to us: the knowledge of what to do in order to live in harmony with our fellows.

Rousseau's rejection of society in favor of free choice and uncorrupted nature should be seen in this context. It is not enough for Rousseau that institutions should arise from consent in the manner of the common law or the market; they must be the object of consent. We must stand outside our institutions and ask ourselves whether we would freely choose them from among alternatives. If the answer is yes, then this forms the basis of a social contract. In entering

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such a contract, we establish a legitimate order—but only then. For only then do our institutions reflect our own autonomous submission to government. Only then is authority bestowed upon government by the governed. Only then, in other words, does the self win against the others.

In Rousseau, of course, the contract does not amount to much. No sooner are we released from social burdens than we submit to a "general will" that brooks no opposition, and that adds to its commands the insolent assertion that, in obeying it, we are doing our own will. Freedom is no sooner obtained than thrown away. All who have studied Robespierre's "despotism of liberty" will know how dangerous Rousseau's paradoxes can be when their inner (that is to say, religious) meaning is brought to the surface.

Just as dangerous, however, is the assumption that we can jettison all institutions, traditions, and conventions and decide how to make them anew. This is the root assumption of liberalism, and it recurs in all versions of the social contract—even the hypothetical contract of the philosopher John Rawls. It implies that we can make rational choices, knowing what to do and how to do it, without the benefit of social knowledge—in other words, without the hard-earned legacy of consensual solutions.

It is not just that there is no reason to think that this is so. It is rather that there is every reason to think the opposite. We know what to do only when we have a sense of right and wrong, an implicit awareness of the unseen multitudes whom our actions affect, and the instinctive knowledge of what is admirable or despicable, that are percolated through the channels of tradition. Without traditions we have no "conception of the good," as the philosopher John Rawls describes it. And, for all that Rawls says to the contrary, a social contract between creatures with no conception of the good is a parody of rational choice—the kind of parody that Rawls places before us, imagining that he has given a final proof, and not a refutation, of the liberal view of society.

Jean Starobinski attributes to Rousseau an emotional need to reject all mediation—every institution, custom, and practice that comes between the self and its desire. Whether in love, in religion, or in education, Rousseau's goal is to remove the veil of "society" so that the individual can take immediate possession of the good that belongs to him by nature, and that has been withheld by the "others" who stand in his way. This perception of society, as a realm of "otherness" or alienation, has a religious meaning. For Rousseau, the self is naturally good and naturally free, living in a state of unmediated unity that is also a state of love: the *amour de soi* from which our life begins. Evil is to be explained by the sundering of this primal unity, the setting of the self against itself, which occurs when we live as others require. Society induces a fall from innocent *amour de soi* to guilt-ridden *amour-propre*. Only through the social contract, which remakes society as the expression of individual free choice, can we overcome our alienation. The contract therefore has a redemptive meaning and leads to a "civil religion," imposing on every citizen the unmediated relation with the godhead that his nature requires.

The story is familiar in many later versions: Fichte, Hegel, Marx, and Sartre to take but four examples. Rousseau led the way in describing the only available sources of moral knowledge as the instruments of our fall. Wherever the light of human goodness flickers, there Rousseau discerns the shadow of evil. He began what was soon to become a widespread habit of blaming "society" for the evil deeds of people, of calling for the reform of institutions rather than for the punishment of wrongdoers, and of perceiving in the worst of human crimes a paradisal innocence that the moral life itself had brought to nothing.

There is another way of seeing Rousseau's social contract, not as the redemption of society through the sacrament of choice,

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but as the *rejection* of society as an *obstacle* to choice. This other way of seeing the matter underlies Burke's criticism of the official doctrines of revolutionary France. Society, Burke pointed out, is an open-ended partnership (he even said "contract") between generations. The dead and the unborn are as much members of society as the living. To dishonor the dead is to reject the relation on which society is built—the relation of obligation between generations. Those who have lost respect for their dead have ceased to be trustees of their inheritance. Inevitably, therefore, they lose the sense of obligation to future generations. The web of obligations shrinks to the present tense. Such, for Burke, was the lesson of the French Revolution.

It is undeniably true that the contractual view of society grants enormous privileges to the living, and disenfranchises the rest. If taken seriously, as the sole ground of legitimacy, the social contract licenses the continuous pillaging of all resources in obedience to the whims of their temporary trustees. That is exactly what we have witnessed since the Enlightenment. All customs and all institutions have been measured and remade against the standard of choice. The question of their authority has been replaced by another—do we the living want them? If we don't, then they must go. The social knowledge that comes into existence not from my free choice, but as the byproduct of other people's—dead people's—choices, has been little by little depleted.

A striking illustration of this loss of knowledge is given by Rousseau himself in *Emile*, the work that has acquired a Dewey-eyed following in America, on account of its wondrous impracticality. It is perhaps ironic that something of the aristocratic view of life is preserved in Rousseau's wholehearted attack on it; indeed, if Rousseau's prescriptions have any force, the only way to educate a child is through the vast expense of a private tutor and a country estate.

At the same time, however, this child who depends on an aristocratic budget must stop short of acquiring aristocratic ideas—or indeed any ideas, other than those that are prompted by the self-love and pity that are nature's primeval gift to him. For Rousseau, the task of the educator is not to fill, but to open the mind of the child; not to inculcate a respect for authority, but to instill an attitude of questioning; not to tell the child what others have discovered, but to induce him to discover things for himself. Nothing short of a highly educated tutor, devoting himself full time to his ward, can substitute for the books and lessons that Emile is denied.

That only raises the questions of how the tutor is to obtain his knowledge, and how the process is to begin. In a curious episode, Rousseau describes the elaborate procedure whereby Emile is to discover the phenomenon of magnetism—a procedure that requires days of preparation and experiment, and that leads to less knowledge of the matter than could be gleaned from a single paragraph of writing. In order that Emile should discover truth for himself, truth must also be concealed from him. He is not allowed books, not allowed formal lessons, not allowed the normal means of class instruction, not really allowed childhood—since childhood exists only against the background of adult authority, where rites of passage are acknowledged and performed.

It is now orthodoxy among educationists that the purpose of education is to benefit the child. From the long-term point of view, however, it is not the child that is the measure of educational success, but the society that includes him.

Even if it were possible to educate children in this way, one thing is certain: that each generation would know less than the one before. The labor of discovery would

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have to be endlessly repeated, and the process whereby knowledge accumulates would come to a halt. And that, of course, is Rousseau's underlying intention—not to liberate the child, but to destroy all intellectual authority, apart from that which resides in the self. Emile is to be brought up as "un sauvage fait pour habiter les villes." His natural freedom is to remain untainted by the *amour-propre* that is the poisoned gift of society. But he is the least free of children, hampered at every point in his search for information, deprived of all sources of socially engendered knowledge, and condemned to repeat the labors of past generations in his futile attempt to know as much as they did. We glimpse here what Burke had in mind: absent generations have been deleted from the picture, and freedom confined to the present tense.

Emile is a fascinating work, and by no means to be dismissed. The best parts are those that elicit the least sympathy from the book's normal admirers—the parts dealing with sex education and the virtue of chastity. Here Rousseau was forced to admit that the method of experiment could not produce the desired result. Chastity comes about only when pleasures are forbidden, when the other sex is shrouded in mystery, and when an elaborate story is told, embellished and believed, concerning the beauty and remoteness of sexual union. Modern sex education is conceived as a "liberation" from fear, doubt, and disease—a "how to" manual for children, which is also a form of vicarious pedophilia for their teachers. But sex was the one matter in which Rousseau was prepared to acknowledge that the artificial, not the natural, is the source of moral knowledge, and that custom must win against choice.

The real message of *Emile* lies in the parts that have been most influential, and, in particular, in the idea that teaching is or ought to be "child-centered." It is now orthodoxy among educationists that the purpose of education is to benefit the child. From the long-term point of view, however, it is not the child who is the measure of educational success, but the society that includes him. From the social point of view the purpose of education is to perpetuate an inheritance of learning. Knowledge is not a means of improving the child, the child is a means of enhancing knowledge.

The difference here is not merely a difference of attitude or style. It is a difference in philosophy. The "child-centered" teacher is in the business of helping children to "realize their potential." The "knowledge-centered" teacher is in the business of passing on what he knows—ensuring, in other words, that his knowledge does not die with him. His first duty, therefore, is to find the pupil with the ability to learn what he has to teach; only then can he fulfill his goal as a teacher. If, having done so, he wishes to help other children to "realize their potential," all well and good—provided he acknowledges that many of them can do this only by ceasing to learn.

The authority of a teacher stems from his knowledge. Children instantly recognize this kind of authority, and defer to the person who possesses it. In child-centered education, however, the only real authority is the child—the little Jean-Jacques who is busy "realizing his potential" in whatever messy way suggests itself.

Some might object to the use of the word "authority" here. Rousseau would not be one of them. He recognized that human beings are made to command and therefore to obey. It was not obedience that disturbed him, but obedience to others. Civil liberty is achieved by laying down laws for oneself; the child becomes fit for civil society by learning to obey his true (but socially occluded) nature. But this conception of obedience presents us with another Rousseauvian paradox, and one that lies at the heart of modern education and its failure: Rousseau asserts the tutor's absolute right of property over Emile in order to make Emile absolutely free. Likewise modern educationists assume, in the name of the child and his freedom, an absolute right to compel school attendance, while ensuring

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that nothing will be learned in school that will serve to distinguish one pupil from another. The purpose of modern education is to *remove* advantages, to deprive children of the attributes that grace them above their peers. Look at a present-day class in "attitude training" and you will have a vivid picture of what it means to be "forced to be free."

Of course, the element of compulsion is hidden behind a screen of agile rhetoric. It is to Rousseau that we owe the concept of education as a process of free exploration and self-development, in which the teacher plays the role not of expert or authority, but of adviser, playmate, and friend. By shifting attention from the teacher to the child; by suggesting that if children do not learn it is not because of a lack of discipline but because of an excess of it; and by urging an "individualized" teaching process in which the relation between teacher and pupil is rewritten as a kind of partnership whereby "active learning" and "learning by acquaintance" replace the traditional approach of "learning by description"—in these and many other ways modern educational theory has served to institutionalize ideas first voiced by Rousseau. (The inherent destructiveness of this shift has now been proven throughout the Western world.) Rousseau also anticipated the contemporary hostility toward memorization. "Emile," he decreed, "will never learn anything by heart"—thus reversing at a stroke an educational tradition that began with Plato's Academy, one that made possible the vast accumulation of knowledge in medieval society.

In another respect, too, *Emile* anticipated the depths of modern folly. To Rousseau, the child's natural freedom is so precious a commodity that he should never be introduced to knowledge save through concepts and interests that he already has. Nothing alien to his nature must be imposed on him; hence all lessons must engage with his existing interests. When educational theory rose to prominence in the Sixties, and took upon itself the task of abolishing education, "relevance" was announced as the goal. As a result, the educational value of a subject began to be measured, not in terms of the knowledge that it imparted, but in terms of the interests of those who had yet to understand it.

"Life skills" looks fascinating to a child who comes for the first time to this bagful of banalities. But what difference is made by it to the child's ultimate vision of himself and reality, and how "relevant" will it seem to him when he looks back on it from the adult perspective? Conversely, mathematics, history, literature, and grammar address themselves hardly at all to the interests of those who have no knowledge of them;

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only in the course of study can their "relevance" be perceived, and only then, under the influence of a transformation that they themselves engender, does a child begin to "need" their instruction. In the face of these, to my mind obvious, truths, the "relevance revolution" in education seems like a victory for ignorance, and it is a victory that owes as much to Rousseau as any other revolution that has shaken the modern world. Indeed, one can read *Emile* not as a treatise on education, but as a treatise against education. Such, it seems to me, is the real meaning of the statement that "one acquires clearer and more certain ideas of things, when one learns for oneself, than when instructed by another"—a statement that makes the conflict between self and other into the secret drama of the classroom.

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Rousseau is often singled out as the originator of the cult of "sensibility," the one who wished to place the emotions in the center of human life and at the same time to deprive reason of its former sovereignty. I don't think this captures the real temper of his thought. Emotion and reason, for Rousseau, were inextricable, and our greatest emotions, he believed, derive from our predicament as rational beings—our predicament as freely choosing, self-committing agents, with a consciousness of self that sets us apart from nature. It is this apartness from nature that defines our condition and the bad effects that we must overcome. We overcome it not by giving free reign to passion—on the contrary, for Rousseau our emotions should be intensely focused, rather than promiscuously dispersed. Julie, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, owes her tragic fate not to chastity and fidelity, but to the fact that she allows a socially engendered sense of duty to take precedence over a self-engendered, but chaste and faithful, passion.

We overcome our alienation, Rousseau believed, not through passion but through rational choice. We must remake the world in the image of freedom; we must rescue human life from custom and recast it as a thing intended, a shrine for the liberated self. That is why, in the last analysis, a social contract is necessary: so that society should cease to be an external force, and become instead an expression of our inner freedom. By beginning everything anew, from procedures that conserve the sovereignty of the self, we find redemption—so Rousseau and many others have thought. But what if the self and its freedom, conceived in this ahistorical way, are myths? Where then do we look for legitimate government and the foundations of political order?

There is at the heart of Rousseau's vision a culpable a priorism—a failure to take seriously the fact that the human being, in all his aspects, including his capacity for rational choice, is the product of a history that stretches before and after him. The search for origins is doomed to failure; at every point we encounter the historical contingency, the arbitrariness of human destiny. We are thrown together without reason or cause, and must make the best of circumstances that have been indelibly marked by a history that was not our doing. Hence, we should look for legitimacy not in origins but in procedures. Instead of asking whether the social order conforms to some abstract criterion of justice, we should ask whether, and if so how, a perceived injustice might be rectified; whether the individual can obtain redress for any injury; and whether crime is punished and loyalty rewarded. We should study the functioning of offices and roles and institutions, and ask whether they soften or heighten human conflicts. The quest for origins asks no such answerable questions. For it is a religious quest: an attempt to anchor society outside history, and to take a God's-eye view of all our brief arrangements.

Rather than aiming at that unattainable perspective, we should follow Hume and give the benefit of the doubt—and the subsequent benefit of doubting—to those activities for which "custom" is the comprehensive name. Customs are shared and gain their significance from the fact of being shared, but are not, in the normal case, compulsory. Customs are social constraints that you are free to defy. They include all the normal ways in which we confirm and celebrate our social membership, all the normal ways in which the finite store of knowledge is enhanced and passed on, and all the normal ways in which conflicts are discovered and resolved.

How customs arise is immaterial; that they arise is the sign that human beings are able, against the odds, to form the large and complex societies that are necessary for their survival, and that could never be the subject matter of a contract. It is in the nature of customs that they cannot be chosen: they arise by an invisible hand from our consensual dealings. Hence, no custom could feature among the terms of a social contract. If we look on customs as the objects of self-conscious choice, then they cease to be customs and become "lifestyles"—as inheri-

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tance becomes "heritage" when put on sale. But customs are an irreplaceable source of social and moral knowledge; we should therefore neither hastily uproot them nor deceive ourselves into thinking that we know how they might be replaced. We don't know and we cannot know, since the relevant kind of knowledge is socially created and historically dispersed.

This is not to say that customs should be unquestioningly accepted. But the "benefit of doubting" comes only after the benefit of the doubt—only when we have conceded that the survival of a custom is one powerful proof of its authority. Even if we should question customs, enough of them must be held constant if our questions are to have a purpose. When everything is questioned, then nothing makes sense—including the question.

Of course, if we believe in the natural innocence of the human being, our imperfect social arrangements will seem to us to be the sign of some terrible mistake. We might then try to think our way back into the state of primeval innocence, in order to see what would have been chosen by people who had yet to succumb to "society." But there never was such a state of innocence. The possibility of error is inherent in our condition. Custom, too, is the product of error, for it is the way in which error is overcome.

The virtue that the Romans described as *pietas* consisted not in a rejection of customs, institutions, and laws, but, on the contrary, in an underlying acceptance—a humble recognition that we are not the producers but the products of our world. We must strive to be worthy of an inheritance that we did not create, and to amend it only when we have first understood it. Piety is not confined to the temple and the altar. It is an attitude to life, based in a recognition of our frailty and a respect for the dead.

In place of this, Rousseau erected a God who is not in the world but impassibly removed from it, whose traces on earth lie in a past so distant that they are now indiscernible. All honor is owed to this "real absence"—and to the self as His vicar on earth. No custom or ceremony is worthy of devotion, since all human institutions are polluted until freely chosen. Henceforth, our religious energies are to be diverted from the labor of repairing and upholding traditions, and devoted instead to the task of destroying them. Only in this way will we regain the Paradise from which we were sundered by our human fault. This explains the extraordinary zeal with which the followers of Rousseau embarked upon their revolution. Theirs was a holy war, a war against superstition in the name of God.

Clear custom away, and you take away much evil. But you also take away the knowledge of evil. Hence, you make way for evil of another kind, in which people—inoculated against remorse and assuming an absolute right to demolish whatever impedes their rational plan for human happiness—embark on vast social experiments.

But God was no more than a name. The "Supreme Being" of Robespierre, the "Being that exists by himself" of Rousseau, the abstract deity of Voltaire—all these terms denote not God himself, but the God-shaped hole in the heart of things, which is henceforth to be filled by human sacrifice.

In the sixth part of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie, by then living on sublimated terms with her former lover, writes to him that "the country of chimaeras is the only one in this world that is worthy of habitation, and such is the nothingness (*néant*) of human things that, apart from the Being who exists by Himself, nothing is beautiful except that which is not." This sentence captures some of the religious origin of Rousseau's social

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philosophy, and also the immense negative energy behind his account of our condition. The nothingness that he perceived in human things he also brought to them. His description of God is really a description of himself—the self existing by itself in solitude, among chimaeras of its own creation. There are only two sources of authority, two legitimate powers, in this world of usurpation: God and self. And in a mysterious way these are not two things, but one, joined in an imagined Paradise that, paradoxically, is more real, because more free, than anything actual. As for the world of ordinary human things, it contains nothing beautiful. It was created not by God or Rousseau, but by "society," which is the real presence of the Devil.

And perhaps, looking back at his great achievement across two centuries of ruin, this is how we should see Jean-Jacques Rousseau—as a religious thinker bent on destroying the old gods, but with only a void to put in place of them. That which he attacked as "society," and as the instrument of our Fall, was really the fertile topsoil of culture, in which all that we value is rooted. Sacred and profane, virtue and vice, good and evil—all these compete in the undergrowth of custom. Clear custom away, and you take away much evil. But you also take away the knowledge of evil. Hence, you make way for evil of another kind, in which people—inoculated against remorse and assuming an absolute right to demolish whatever impedes their rational plan for human happiness—embark on vast social experiments. This happened at the French Revolution. It has happened many times in modern Europe. It has even happened in America in the revolution that has destroyed American schools. And it will happen wherever people try to reconcile equality and liberty, and to destroy custom as the enemy of both.

There is a lesson to be drawn from Rousseau that is of great importance today. Social contests and tensions have been conceptualized in a way that favors the liberal cause. Every conflict is seen in terms of power: who enjoys it and who suffers it—"who? whom?," in Lenin's summary. But the deep conflicts concern not power but knowledge. Which institutions, which procedures, and which customs preserve and enhance the store of social knowledge? Liberals attack the traditional curriculum, for example, on the grounds that it confers power on white males, and "disempowers" the remainder. Hence women's studies, black studies, gay studies, and all the other mock subjects that will in time destroy our universities. But the question of the curriculum has been wrongly posed. The traditional curriculum existed not because it empowered people, but because it contained an accumulation of social knowledge—knowledge of the human mind, the human character, and the human heart—whose utility is obvious to those who have studied it, but inconceivable to those who have not. The modern Rousseau, obsessed with inequality and social power, will therefore never understand the institutions that most offend him, and his relentless efforts to undermine them will deprive both him and everyone else of the knowledge required to put the damage right.

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Bonnard and "the stupidities"

by Hilton Kramer

I agree with you that the painter's only solid ground is the palette and colors, but as soon as the colors achieve an illusion, they are no longer judged and the stupidities begin.
—Bonnard to Matisse, 1935

In short, there is something abject and sinister about Bonnard's late bathers. . . . The metamorphosis may be gorgeous, but it is also a kind of elegant pourriture, *exquisite rot, canvases shimmering with the iridescence of putrefaction, glowing with the ooze of the* informe. *It is significant that Bonnard's work is at its best when he kills off or mutilates his subject: Marthe dismembered or floating in deathlike passivity is the heroine of his most exciting canvases.*
—Linda Nochlin, *Art in America*, July 1998

There is decadence that excites and decadence that enervates. Bonnard's is the second sort: edgeless, nerveless, weird, fussy. He isn't mindless, exactly, but he withholds his mind from his transactions with painting. For thought, he substitutes maundering on autopilot. His compass is a vague tastefulness. This comforts people who dislike thinking. I submit that such people are already comfortable enough, on their own lookout, and should not be indulged.
—Peter Schjeldahl, *The Village Voice*, July 28, 1998

Who could have imagined that in 1998, more than half a century after the artist's death, the paintings of Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) would still be a subject of controversy? Yet in certain influential quarters of the art world this season's Bonnard exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art has elicited a response at once so intemperate and so bizarre that at times it went beyond controversy to become a moral indictment.[1] This may strike us as a very odd thing to happen to an artist as reclusive as Bonnard was in his life and as exclusively concentrated on the gravity of the painter's vocation as he remained throughout all the later decades of his long career. But it would probably not have surprised Bonnard himself. Responses of this kind were precisely what he had in mind when he spoke of "the stupidities" which painting of his persuasion—so radically entrenched in the language of "the palette and colors"—was likely to inspire in critics who regard such a pictorial practice as a wicked indulgence.

What is it, then, about Bonnard's painting that excites such a heated condemnatory response? Make no mistake: Bonnard really incites these critics to paroxysms of denunciation and ridicule. Linda Nochlin, the Lila Acheson Wallace professor of modern art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, went so far as to say of Bonnard's late

1 "Bonnard" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on June 17, 1998, and remains on view through October 13. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Sarah Whitfield, with essays by Ms. Whitfield and John Elderfield, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (272 pages, $60; $29.95 paper).

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Bather pictures that "I am so repelled by the melting of flesh-and-blood model into the molten object of desire of the male painter that I want to plunge a knife into the delectable body-surface." (She is speaking of Bonnard's paintings of his beloved wife, Marthe.) Peter Schjeldahl, still in mourning over the lost illusions of the 1960s counterculture, adds to the indictment by speaking of these same paintings as "eye-candy," "trivial," the residue of "a masturbatory trace," and "an art that is on its last legs as a culture-changing enterprise." These writers clearly disapprove of Bonnard's marriage as well as the paintings that derived from his domestic situation, and are made wildly angry by the high reputation he has achieved as a modern master—a reputation that Mr. Schjeldahl dismisses as having "one foot in the museum and the other in among glossy-magazine perfume ads."

We are given an essential clue to the nature of this critical distemper in Mr. Schjeldahl's reference to an art that is seen to fail in its duty as "a culture-changing enterprise." Professor Nochlin's version of this charge is that Bonnard's later paintings mark "a retreat from the public world." In other words, Bonnard's paintings of his wife at her bath fail to meet what might be described as a politically correct, social-activist quotient in art. And if this is indeed the charge, then it must be said that it is at once correct and utterly ludicrous. These paintings most certainly are insufficiently *engagé* in the political sense to qualify as social-activist art. They are definitely not what we used to call "avant-garde" either. They have not been conceived to give us a *nouveau frisson*. Yet because both Professor Nochlin and Mr. Schjeldahl are savvy enough to know that the age of the avant-garde is long past, they are obliged to recast their indictments to conform to a roster of socio-sexual offenses more appropriate to the postmodernist culture wars than to the old arguments over "advanced" art.

Professor Nochlin thus speaks of dismemberment and mutilation—terms more aptly applied, perhaps, to a discussion of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* than to an elucidation of such masterpieces of memory and desire as *The Bath* (1925), *The Bathroom* (1932), and *Nude in the Bath* (1936). Mr. Schjeldahl, too, writes as if Bonnard has violated some sort of social compact in failing to depict his wife as an aging senior citizen. "He painted her at least 384 times," Mr. Schjeldahl writes, "never with real attention to her face and invariably, even when she was 72 years old and dying, as a nubile young woman."

Alas, it isn't only in regard to the art of painting that such criticism may be relegated to what Bonnard called "the stupidities." Is it really necessary to explain to grownups like Linda Nochlin and Peter Schjeldahl that when a man and a woman have lived together in a conjugal relation over a long period of time they inevitably accumulate a reservoir of erotic memory that profoundly alters the ways in which they see and experience each other's physical presence? A gesture glimpsed in old age may evoke emotions tethered to a distant past that are far more vivid than the actualities of present experience. Couples who have lived together a long time do not meet each other as utter strangers upon awakening to the light of day. They tend to see each other through an involuntary scrim of memory, desire, familiarity, and regret. In such lives, the past lies close to the surface of all waking experience, ready at any moment to illuminate a gesture, an utterance, even a silence, with some freshly remembered simulacrum. A sudden look of delight, a cry of pain, or something as ordinary as the sound of a footstep on the stair—or the ablutions of the bath—may unexpectedly trigger feelings that, however brief in duration, wipe away the years to reveal a continuum of emotion, attachment, and association that is all the more precious for being unanticipated and unwilled. Does all this really have to be explained to writers claiming to be educated, sentient adults? Apparently it does, to judge from "the stupidities" that have been addressed to

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Bonnard's *Bather* paintings on the occasion of the MOMA exhibition.

Something like this realm of experience was, in any case, central to Bonnard's project as a painter in all the later decades of his life. His word for it was "poetry"—a poetry of feeling that for Bonnard was the poetry of life itself—and he was indeed its unrivaled pictorial master in the art of the modern era. This "poetry" is not to be mistaken for a romantic idyll, however. There was little about the anxiety, melancholy, and despair of conjugal experience that Bonnard did not comprehend—and make the subject of his paintings—long before he embarked upon the late *Bather* pictures. In the early bedroom paintings—*Man and Woman in an Interior* (1898) and *Man and Woman* (1900), among others—we are given glimpses of a world of sexual melancholy more often associated with the paintings of Edvard Munch and the drama of Henrik Ibsen, both potent influences in the circle Bonnard frequented in this period, than with the *luxe, calme et volupté* of the Impressionist masters. When he does come to paint a version of the latter in *The Earthly Paradise* (1916–20), he sets the autobiographical scene in Eden just before the fateful Fall—a fate Bonnard well understood to be his own in this central attachment of his long life.

Nor was there anything about the ravages that time inflicts on the frailty of human flesh that Bonnard did not understand and experience at first-hand. But this difficult subject was something he reserved for his own remarkable self-portraits, which are sometimes terrifying in their pitiless candor. To his obsessive depictions of the aging Marthe, however, Bonnard brought an unfailing moral delicacy that gives priority to an intensity of emotion that precludes the very possibility of the kind of pitiless candor the painter lavished on his self-portraits—a moral delicacy in which time is dissolved in favor of memory and feeling. Why this moral delicacy—and the exquisite painterly invention that is its exact pictorial correlative—should now be regarded as a personal and moral failure, if not something worse, rather than as a triumph of aesthetic sensibility, is a matter that has more to do with the vagaries of postmodern sexual politics than with the achievements of art.

Reading the criticism I have been quoting here—"decadence that enervates," "a masturbatory trace," "exquisite rot," and so forth—I am reminded of the fatuous way in which Marxist critics used to write about Proust. Comparisons between Proust and Bonnard have been made many times, of course, but nowhere has the comparison done more to illuminate Bonnard's painting than in Timothy Hyman's new book on Bonnard, which in my judgment is by far the best thing ever written about the painter.[2] In calling our attention to what "aligns Bonnard's vision with that of his near contemporary Marcel Proust (1871–1922) in his vast novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*," Mr. Hyman writes:

> We know that the artist read *A la recherche* probably before 1925, and reread it after 1940. Proust's artist-character Elstir may contain a component of Bonnard (he may be Monsieur Biche, "Mr. Bitchy," at Madame Verdurin's *petit cénacle*, or little group), but the real identity is with the narrator, "Marcel"; just as Proust writes the book of himself, so Bonnard will paint the picture of himself. Bonnard's self, like Marcel's, is not that fixed and continuous character of our usual social being. What he has to record is a sudden stabbing involuntary vision of things, and of his place among them. Jean Clair writes of Bonnard being "giddy in the astonishment of the relived moment." He is a myopic spectator, moving through a "floating world," until arrested by a sudden focus. (The transition from blur to focus is essential to his painterly language.)

And further:

> Freud downgraded ecstasy, writing it off, along with daydreaming, as an aberration—as

2 *Bonnard*, by Timothy Hyman; Thames and Hudson, 224 pages, $14.95.

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> atavistic forms of mental life, and regressions to "primary process" thinking. But Bonnard's first-person art could be seen as a sustained argument for the validity of such modes of being, often in association with Marthe. Her bathroom at "Le Bosquet" was for Bonnard what the famous "cork-lined room" was to Proust: a place of incarceration, and the alchemical chamber in which the base metal of everyday was transformed to gold.

It is in passages like these that Mr. Hyman's *Bonnard* seems to give us not only a glimpse into the painter's creative imagination but also an authentic account of our own experience of the paintings themselves. It goes far in establishing Bonnard's greatness as a painter and the depth of feeling and thought upon which the paintings are based.

Yet the sad fact is that attacks on Bonnard are hardly a recent development, though I know of nothing in the past that quite matches the virulence of the criticisms I have mentioned here. The only thing approaching it is Picasso's now legendary hostility to Bonnard—"That's not painting, what he does"—and the attack on Bonnard in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1947, the year of the painter's death, an attack which Picasso is believed to have inspired. This article asked the question, "Pierre Bonnard—est-il un grand peintre?" and answered with a resounding negative judgment: "It is evident that this reverence [for Bonnard] is shared only by people who know nothing about the grave difficulties of art and cling above all to what is facile and agreeable." As I wrote in 1984 on the occasion of the Bonnard exhibition at Beaubourg in Paris: "Some version of this judgment will always, I suppose, be the view of professional avant-gardists in every generation, and it is for this reason that Bonnard has survived, at least until now, as a kind of displaced person in the art of our time."[3]

Moreover, this attack in *Cahiers d'Art* was echoed, or at least paralleled, in avant-garde circles in New York at the time. Clement Greenberg, for example, wrote about Bonnard in 1947, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Bignou Gallery, and then again in 1948 when MOMA devoted its first exhibition to the artist. These were crucial years in the development of the New York School, and it was from the perspective of this American avant-garde that Greenberg made his curiously divided assessment of Bonnard's accomplishments. For while he clearly admired Bonnard and gave his readers a close account of his painterly qualities—qualities that, as he wrote in 1947, "led Bonnard to paint more and more abstractly; the greater the attention to pigment and brushstroke the less becomes the concern with the original idea of the subject in nature"—he couldn't quite forgive Bonnard for retaining his attachment to the object.

> Here . . . is a way of approaching abstract painting that makes a detour around Cubism and yet arrives at the same place in the end [he wrote in 1947]. But Bonnard never abandons the object, and never will—nor does he violate it as Picasso has done, while still retaining it. He holds on to the third dimension more tenaciously. He may simplify nature but he does not reorganize it with respect to anything except color; and so the world he shows us disorients no one familiar with that of Monet or Renoir.

Greenberg understood that what Bonnard "seems to want is a big *flat* picture with the massiveness and weight of Tintoretto or Veronese," and admired what he called Bonnard's "audacity" in this respect. Yet because the artist was still found wanting by the avant-garde standards of that particular moment in American painting, the final judgment is highly equivocal.

> But the intimacy of Bonnard's art, its concentration on gentle pleasures, and the fact that it smells permanently of the fashions of

3 See "Bonnard in Paris" in *The New Criterion* (May 1984).

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> 1900–14, expressing as it does the desire of the French middle classes to make history stop and stand still at 1912, and leave them undisturbed in the enjoyment of the modest but refined amenities that the Third Republic had permitted them to accumulate—all this should not mislead us into thinking that [Bonnard] lacks ambition as a painter.

When Greenberg returned to the subject in 1948, his assessment was equally equivocal:

> The question why an artist who painted as consummately as Bonnard should have failed quite to attain major quality is perhaps best explained by a certain aspect of French tradition. . . . He experimented within the limits set for him, but did not try very hard to break through them.

All of this is on a much higher level of critical discourse than what we have been getting in response to the current Bonnard exhibition at MOMA, but it is also a reminder of the degree to which judgments of Bonnard's achievements have been—and continue to be—hostage to whatever mix of avant-garde sentiment and radical political ideology happens to be rampant. The aesthete in Greenberg clearly responded with enthusiasm to Bonnard's painterly qualities, yet a certain residue of Marxist sentiment—by the late 1940s, Greenberg was speaking of himself as a "disabused Marxist"—combined with his vocation as a champion of the American avant-garde to render Bonnard finally unacceptable.

Outside the circles of that avant-garde, however, Bonnard became something of a hero and a model for a younger generation of painters—for Nell Blaine and Fairfield Porter and the painters upon whose work they were to exert an influence. And even in the circle of the Abstract Expressionist painters, at least one painter—Mark Rothko—found in that 1947 exhibition at the Bignou Gallery the foundation of the mode of color abstraction that became his signature style. In the current Rothko exhibition at the Whitney Museum, you can see the results of his encounter with Bonnard in 1946–47, and it would be a brave critic who pronounced Rothko a greater painter than Bonnard. For notwithstanding the "stupidities" that the current Bonnard exhibition has met with in New York, I believe that the artist's greatness is now beyond dispute, or ought to be. Still, Bonnard's own pessimism on this question cannot be ignored, either. "Speaking, when you have something to say, is like looking," he said. "But who looks? If people could see, and see properly, and see whole, they would all be painters. And it's because people have no idea how to look that they hardly ever understand."

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The greatest Victorian

by Roger Kimball

There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money.
—Samuel Johnson, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*

The essence of civilization, as we know, is dullness. In an ultimate analysis, it is only an elaborate invention . . . for abolishing the fierce passions, the unchastened enjoyments, the awakening dangers, the desperate conflicts, . . . the excitements of a barbarous age, and to substitute for them indoor pleasures, placid feelings, and rational amusements. That a grown man should be found to write reviews is in itself a striking fact. Suppose you asked Achilles to do such a thing, do you imagine he would consent?
—Walter Bagehot, *on Matthew Arnold* (1853)

Only a blockhead can fail to realize that our characters are the result of our conduct.
—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

The historian Jacques Barzun got it exactly right when he noted that the English writer, editor, and professional banker Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) is "'well-known' without being known well." Bagehot is one of those distinguished literary figures who seems to have been embalmed by his own distinction. There are no doubt many reasons for this. In his essay "Bagehot as Historian" (1968), Professor Barzun mentions two: he bore a name that was "puzzling to pronounce"—this made people shy about quoting him—and he made the mistake of dying at the inconsiderate age of fifty-one, before his idiosyncratic genius could take firm root in the popular imagination. Bagehot—I pronounce the first syllable like "badge," the second like "it": "badge-it"—has consequently had the misfortune to become more celebrated than he is read and discussed.

The misfortune affects the reading public as much as it does Bagehot's posthumous reputation. To miss out on Bagehot is to miss out on one of the great triumphs of English prose. It is a light, champagne prose: sparkling but not facile, broadly allusive but never pedantic, witty and epigrammatic but shrewd, strong, and sober enough to treat an extraordinarily wide range of serious issues. And treat them it does. Bagehot's prose is more than an aesthetic delight: it is a repository of uncommon wisdom about the common realities of life. The excellence of Bagehot's writing, in other words, is an excellence of substance as well as style, matter as well as manner. What he says, he invariably says well; but one generally also finds that it is well that he said what he did.

During his lifetime, Bagehot's essays exerted an enormous influence. He had keen and original things to say about literary figures from Shakespeare and Milton to Shelley and Henry Crabb Robinson. He wrote penetrating essays on Adam Smith, Macaulay, Gibbon, Disraeli, Sir Robert Peel, and the English reformer John Bright.

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His speciality, as one critic observed, "was the human element in all the affairs and institutions of life, whether it relates to literature, history, politics, economics, sociology, religion, or science." At the end of 1851, Bagehot went to Paris to escape a bout of melancholy and indecision about his future career. Louis Napoleon just then embarked on the coup d'état that inaugurated the Second Empire. Bagehot's eye-witness dispatches to the *Inquirer*, a London newspaper, on the coup and its aftermath turned out to be a classic of political reporting. In 1867, Bagehot published *The English Constitution* (serialized the preceding two years in Anthony Trollope's *Fortnightly Review*), a work that is still regarded as an indispensable account of the workings of the English government. Indeed, one cannot help thinking that Prime Minister Tony Blair and what remain of the Windsors could profit greatly by meditating on Bagehot's reflections on the importance of preserving the charm and mystery of the monarchy. "We must not let in daylight upon magic," Bagehot wrote in a famous passage. "We must not bring the Queen into the combat of politics, or she will cease to be reverenced by all combatants; she will become one combatant among many." *Autre temps, autre moeurs*—or do I mean *plus ça change*. . . ?

Bagehot seemed incapable of writing a dull sentence—a somewhat paradoxical situation, perhaps, since dullness was a virtue that he much applauded. Whether the subject was the American Civil War—about which he wrote nearly forty articles—Parliamentary reform, or the workings of the London money market, he was sure to be bold, memorable, and pertinent. He was particularly pertinent when reflecting about what we might call the psychology of politics: the lineaments of leadership and motivation. "It is the life of teachers which is *catching*, not their tenets," Bagehot noted in *Physics and Politics* (1872), perhaps his most famous book. The influence of personal example is one reason that what we have come to call the "character issue" has always been so important in government: "In political matters, how quickly a leading statesman can change the tone of the community! We are most of us earnest with Mr. Gladstone; we were most of us *not* so earnest in the time of Lord Palmerston. The change is what everyone feels, though no one can define it."

Bagehot did not simply comment on events from afar. As editor of *The Economist*—a position he held from 1861 until his untimely death—his advocacy of free trade helped to shape the financial policies of England at the zenith of her power. Gladstone was one of many politicians from both parties who sought his counsel. He became, it has been frequently observed, a kind of "supplementary Chancellor of the Exchequer." In an essay published in 1948, the eminent Victorianist G. M. Young, after duly reviewing the obvious candidates for the title of "The Greatest Victorian," finally awarded the palm to Bagehot. George Eliot, Tennyson, Arnold, Ruskin, or Darwin may each have made greater contributions in his own line; the title *Victorianorum maximus*—greatest of the Victorians—may belong to one of them. But Bagehot's all-round genius, Young concluded, entitles him to the title *Victorianum maxime*, "The Greatest Victorian."

Many distinguished personages have agreed. Woodrow Wilson, for one, was smitten with Bagehot, calling him "a seer" and "one of the most original and audacious wits that the English race has produced." Of course, it would be unfair to hold Bagehot accountable for all of his enthusiasts. But it is remarkable how intense his appeal has sometimes been. Consider: the first collected works was issued not by a university or a commercial press but by an American corporation. In 1889, at the direction of its president, the Traveler's Insurance Company published *The Works of Walter Bagehot* in five volumes and sent copies to their policy holders—the idea being, perhaps, that imbibing Bagehot's common-sense reflections on the human condition would

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tend to make people better insurance risks. Doubtless it does.[1]

Bagehot possessed abundantly a gift he discerned in Shakespeare: an "experiencing nature." He delighted in what he called "the grand *shine* on the surface of life." A central word for him is "enjoyment." Keenly moral, he abominated moralism: "Nothing is more unpleasant," he wrote, "than a virtuous person with a mean mind." Likewise, though formidably learned himself, he regularly cautioned against bookishness. "He wrote poetry . . . before breakfast," Bagehot wrote of Southey with undisguised contempt; "he read during breakfast." His sense of ironical contrast was indefatigable. Comparing Gibbon's ornate style with the world-shaking events he described, Bagehot observed that perhaps "when a Visigoth broke a head, he thought that was all. Not so; he was making history: Gibbon has written it down." Mrs. Barrington frequently remarks on Bagehot's boyish sense of fun. At breakfast once with a young nephew struggling to open an egg, Bagehot advised: "Go on, hit it hard on the head. It has no friends."

In politics, Bagehot was a conservative Liberal: a Whig with Tory leanings. How significant were those leanings may be gleaned from his observation (in the context of a discussion of Scott, one of his favorite authors) that "the essence of Toryism is enjoyment." The other side of this heartiness was an impatience that could sometimes border on callousness. "Ugly men," he wrote in his essay on Milton, "are and ought to be ashamed of their existence." Bagehot was loath to entertain, let alone dwell on, life's failures. Poverty, he remarked in a prickly essay on Dickens, is "an unfit topic for continuous art." It is in this sense that Bagehot represents what one critic called "a standing temptation to indulge in selective Victorianism," accentuating the positive and—though not ignoring the negative—tending to dismiss it as a regrettable necessity. "The best history," Bagehot wrote in *Physics and Politics*, "is but like the art of Rembrandt; it casts a vivid light on certain selected causes, on those which were best and greatest; it leaves all the rest in shadow and unseen." And again: "The difficulty in truth is in the existence of the world. It is the fact, that by the constitution of society the bold, the vigorous, and the buoyant, rise and rule; and that the weak, the shrinking, and the timid, fall and serve." True enough; indisputable, even: but not calculated to appeal to sentimentalists.

In a biographical sketch published in 1963, Norman St. John-Stevas noted Bagehot's unusual capacity to "bridge the gulf between the practical and intellectual worlds." One suspects that Bagehot's upbringing had something to do with this amphibious talent. He was born in Langport, Somerset, to parents whose families dominated the town. Bagehot's father, Thomas—an earnest, pragmatic man—was a partner in the Stuckey Bank, which his wife's uncle had founded. It seems fitting that Walter, who would later join his father in business, was born just upstairs from the bank, in the living quarters occupied by his parents. Edith Stuckey, ten years Thomas's senior, was a widow when he married her. Of the three children from

1 There are numerous editions of individual works by Bagehot. Besides the five-volume Traveler's Insurance Company edition, there are two other collected works. The first is *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot*, edited by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Russell Barrington, in an edition of ten volumes. This edition was published in 1915 and includes, as its final volume, a biography-in-letters of Bagehot by Mrs. Barrington. The other, definitive, edition is *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, edited by Norman St. John-Stevas, who is the author of an informative biographical monograph, *Walter Bagehot: A Study of His Life and Thought Together With a Selection from His Political Writings* (Indiana University Press, 1959). The fifteen-volume St. John-Stevas edition of Bagehot appeared between 1965 and 1986 and features important introductory essays by several scholars, including Jacques Barzun's "Bagehot as Historian." This edition was published by *The Economist* in London and Harvard University Press in the United States.

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her first marriage, one was an imbecile and two died in childhood. Walter was the second of two children from her marriage to Thomas, the first of whom also died in childhood. Perhaps in response to these multiple tragedies, Edith Bagehot suffered from periodic bouts of insanity. After her brother died in 1845, Walter became her chief support. As many commentators have noted, the "dark realities" to which he alludes in several essays undoubtedly refer in part to his mother's dementia. "Every trouble in life," he later remarked, "is a joke compared to madness." Despite, or perhaps because of, this mental custodianship, Walter was always extremely close to his mother and was devastated by her death in 1870.

Bagehot's lifelong friend Richard Holt Hutton (1826–1897)—with whom he founded the *National Review* in 1855 and who went on to become editor of the *Spectator*—described Bagehot as "a thorough transcendentalist" but not a "dogmatist." As with many Victorians—and not only Victorians, of course—it is difficult to ascertain all that much about Bagehot's religious convictions. His father, a Unitarian, presided over Sunday morning services at the family house. Walter regularly attended these services—and then accompanied his mother, an ardent Anglican, to the parish church in the afternoon. Bagehot, it is worth remembering, lived at a time when doubt had become an animating principle of faith for many serious people. It was a generation after the time when, as G. M. Young put it in his classic essay "Portrait of an Age," "one undergraduate has to prepare another undergraduate for the news that a third undergraduate has doubts about the Blessed Trinity." By the time Bagehot came of age, the sea of faith was well advanced on (in Arnold's famous phrase) its "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." Whatever the exact nature of Bagehot's doctrinal commitments, he belonged to those determined to preserve the echoes of that retreat, confident, perhaps, that as a tide ebbs so it invariably flows. In his article on Bagehot for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Hutton noted that his friend's "great characteristic as a writer, whether on economic or literary subjects, was a very curious combination of dash and doubt, great vivacity in describing the superficial impressions produced on him by every subject-matter with which he was dealing, and great caution in yielding his mind to that superficial impression." This characteristic acted as a prophylactic against dogmatisms of doubt as well as dogmatisms of credulity.

Both Thomas and Edith were extremely solicitous about Walter's education. At thirteen, after grammar school in Langport, he was sent to school in Bristol, where Dr. James Cowles Prichard, Edith's brother-in-law and the founder of the science of anthropology in England, took him under his wing. University posed a problem. Thomas objected to Oxford and Cambridge because of the religious tests that were still in force. So when he was sixteen, Bagehot went up to the recently established University College in London, where he took a B.A. and M.A. Though dogged by ill-health—at one point he had to take five months off to recuperate—Bagehot was a brilliant student. He studied mathematics with the eminent, idiosyncratic mathematician Augustus De Morgan, and took a first in classics followed by a first in philosophy and the gold medal in intellectual and moral philosophy. Bagehot met and became friends with R. H. Hutton directly he went up in 1842. In 1848, he met and came under the influence of the poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–1861), then principal of University Hall. Clough rather specialized in cultivating intellectual and spiritual impossibilities—Bagehot later criticized his "fatigued way of looking at great subjects"—but, according to Hutton, Clough's adamant negativity exerted a "greater intellectual fascination for Walter Bagehot than any of his contemporaries."

After leaving university in 1848, Bagehot read law. He was called to the bar in 1852, but had by then decided against a legal career and returned to Langport and his

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father's shipowning and banking business. (Banking suited Bagehot. When depressed, St. John-Stevas tells us, Bagehot found it cheering to go down to the bank and run his hands through a heap of sovereigns.) It was around this time that Bagehot began writing in earnest, contributing literary and biographical articles to *The Prospective Review* and other journals and newspapers. At Clevedon, Somerset, in 1857, he met and befriended James Wilson, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who had founded *The Economist* in 1843. At the same time, he met and befriended Eliza Wilson, the eldest of Wilson's six daughters. The two soon became engaged and were married the following year. It was an advantageous as well as an affectionate match. At the Wilson's London house in Belgravia, Bagehot met many prominent contemporaries, including Gladstone, Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, and Lord Grey. In 1859, James Wilson went as a financial advisor to India, where he died from dysentery the following year. In the meantime, he had made Bagehot a director of *The Economist*, which was then being edited by Hutton. After Hutton left to edit the *Spectator*, in 1861, Bagehot took over the editorship. (The paper was owned by Eliza and her five sisters, who paid him £800 a year for his services.) Bagehot regularly contributed two—and sometimes three or four—articles a week to *The Economist* for the rest of his career.

Bagehot was both intensely social and intensely private. He had, Mrs. Barrington says in her biography, "no enemies but few intimates." Outwardly, the balance of Bagehot's career was uneventful. By all accounts, his childless marriage was extremely happy. He stood for Parliament four times and four times lost, once by seven votes. His always delicate health took a decided turn for the worse in 1867 when he caught pneumonia. He never fully recovered. There followed a succession of chills, colds, and other pulmonary complaints, cheerfully borne but increasingly enervating. In March 1877, Bagehot contracted his last illness: a cold that quickly worsened and within a few days proved fatal. He spent his last hours reading Scott's *Rob Roy*.

It should be noted that Bagehot's magic does not work on everyone. One who is conspicuously resistant to his spell is the English poet and critic C. H. Sisson. In *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (1972), Sisson assembled what amounts to a brief for the prosecution. Sisson's objection to Bagehot is twofold. On the one hand, he sees him as "a founding father of the apologetics of 'fact,'" a skeptical, even cynical, force bent on exploding inherited values. On the other hand, Sisson regards Bagehot as "a mon-eyed provincial pushing his way in a conventional society."

> What we get from Bagehot is not so much a theory as a position, and not so much a position as a form of tactics. It is Walter Bagehot whom the successive positions are intended to protect—the Walter Bagehot who slipped down the crack between Unitarianism and Anglicanism; who was the child of the Bank House as some are sons of the manse; whose money was better than that of the squire's but did not produce better effects on the locals; who should have been educated at Oxford but was above that sort of conformism; who conformed instead to the world of business but was cleverer than its other inhabitants; who was all the time worried about the sanity of his stock and did not have any children; who distrusted hereditary powers and owed all his opportunities to family influence.

And so on.

There is probably no antidote to the allergy Mr. Sisson has to Bagehot. It is the revulsion of one sort of temperament to another that seems antithetical. What Mr. Sisson objects to—a large part of it, anyway—is the very thing that makes Bagehot Bagehot. Not his subtlety, exactly, but his deployment of subtlety. Bagehot seldom runs on one track. Whatever topic he is discussing, he always seems to be looking behind it as well. It is not irony, precisely, for although he *uses* irony, Bagehot is too

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earnest to be described as ironical. Jacques Barzun referred in this context to Bagehot's "binocular vision," his habit of taking "double views." The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, in "Walter Bagehot: A Common Man with Uncommon Ideas," observes that "he was that rare species of the twice-born who could give proper due to the rights and merits of the once-born. And he did so not by a denial of his own nature but by virtue of the very subtleties, complications, and ambiguities that informed his nature."

What another critic has dubbed Bagehot's "duomania" shows itself even in his methods of analysis. Bagehot is fond—perhaps overly fond—of breaking his subjects into two categories. When he talks about genius, he begins by discerning two types, regular and irregular; religion comes in two flavors, natural and supernatural; biography is selective or it is exhaustive; fiction is either ubiquitous or sentimental; goodness is sensuous or ascetic. Writers, he says, like teeth, "are divided into incisors and grinders." A rare exception to this law of pairs is found in Bagehot's famous essay on Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning (1864), which expatiates on "Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry."

In fact, the duality one sees in Bagehot's work reflects a duality in his character. On the one hand, we have Bagehot the banker and man of affairs, the man St. John-Stevas describes as "a sardonic, no-nonsense, experienced man of the world." On the other hand, we have "the passionate, mystical Bagehot" who understands that what really matters in life is not calculable in terms of a profit and loss ledger. ("No real Englishman, in his secret soul," Bagehot observed "was ever sorry for the death of a political economist: he is much more likely to be sorry for his life.") The "mystical" side of Bagehot peeks out most conspicuously in some of his literary essays. In "The First Edinburgh Reviewers" (1855), one of his most celebrated essays, Bagehot writes that "A clear, precise, discriminating intellect shrinks at once from the symbolic, the unbounded, the indefinite." He then goes on—with the quintessential Bagehot touch—to observe that

> the misfortune is that mysticism is true. There are certainly kinds of truth, borne in as it were instinctively on the human intellect, most influential on the character and heart, yet hardly capable of stringent definition. Their course is shadowy; the mind seems rather to have seen than to see them, more to feel after than definitely apprehend them. They commonly involve an infinite element, which of course cannot be stated precisely, or else a first principle—*an original tendency—of our intellectual constitution*, which it is impossible not to feel, and yet which it is hard to extricate in terms and words.

The real motor for Bagehot's "duality" was his inextinguishable sense of the incongruous. "How can a soul be a merchant?" he asks. "What relation to an immortal being have the price of linseed, the fall of butter, the tare on tallow, or the brokerage on hemp? Can an undying creature debit *petty expense* and charge for *carriage paid*? . . . The soul ties its shoe; the mind washes its hands in a basin. All is incongruous." One of the things that makes Bagehot's writing so tonic is his refusal to resolve such incongruities. A more pedestrian writer, contemplating the absurdity of the soul tying its shoe, would dispense with the soul and come down firmly on the side of the footwear. It is part of Bagehot's genius to preserve the extravagance—not because it is startling but because it is true to our experience of the world.

Bagehot's greatest achievement was in applying his "binocular vision," his incorrigible sense of the incongruous, to the realm of politics and social life. His talents in this regard were already fully developed in the seven letters that he wrote about Louis Napoleon's coup d'état for the *Inquirer*, a Unitarian paper of abundant goodwill and characteristic shallowness. Bagehot was only twenty-five in December,

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1851, when the coup began. But the letters show that he was already a master of controversy and in full possession of several themes that would occupy him later.

Bagehot certainly knew how to get his readers' attention. Noting that "the first duty of a government is to ensure the security of that industry which is the condition of social life," Bagehot went on cheerfully to defend Louis's use of force and approve his curtailing the French press. The effect of Louis's intervention, Bagehot wrote, "was magical. . . . Commerce instantly improved," the boulevards were once again "gay and splendid; people began again to buy, and consequently to sell." Not that Bagehot was surprised by Louis Napoleon's appeal; after all, he was bold; he had "never been a professor, nor a journalist, nor a promising barrister, nor, by taste, a *littérateur*." These were powerful, if negative, recommendations for leadership in Bagehot's view. Besides, the French people had time and again shown that they were too clever to be trusted with political liberty. "With a well-balanced national character," Bagehot argued, "liberty is a stable thing." "Stupidity," he wrote in a famous passage, is "about the most essential mental quality for a free people, whose liberty is to be progressive, permanent, and on a large scale." It is "nature's favourite recourse for preserving steadiness of conduct and consistency of opinion." But a Frenchman is constitutionally incapable of stupidity: "*esprit* is his essence, wit is to him as water, *bon-mots* as *bon-bons*." Liberty is pleasant; but "the best institutions will not keep right a nation that *will* go wrong."

All this, of course, outraged the good readers of the *Inquirer*, who detested Louis Napoleon, were aghast at his dictatorial pretensions, and regarded any infringement on British-style liberty (at least in Europe) as unconscionable. Then, too, there was the embarrassing thought that if "stupidity" were a prerequisite for political freedom and the English were peculiarly suited for liberty then the English must be mired in stupidity. Well, Bagehot would not have said "mired." But he claimed early and often that stupidity was an Englishman's birthright. "A great part of the 'best' English people," he wrote in *The English Constitution*, "keep their mind in a state of decorous dullness. They maintain their dignity; they get obeyed; they are good and charitable to their dependants. But they have no notion of *play* of mind; no conception that the charm of society depends upon it." Even worse, perhaps, Bagehot had kind things to say about the reactionary behavior of the French Catholic Church, an unpardonable abomination. "Tell an Englishman that a building is without use and he will stare," Bagehot wrote elsewhere; "that it is illiberal, and he will survey it; that it teaches Aristotle, and he will seem perplexed; that it don't teach science, and he won't mind; but only hint that it is the Pope, and he will arise and burn it to the ground."

Naturally, there was a good deal of calculated outrageousness in Bagehot's missives to the *Inquirer*. The sober backdrop to his playfulness was the Burkean theme that stresses the importance of "sense and circumstance" in politics. Above all, Bagehot was writing against "the old idea which still here creeps out in conversation, and sometimes in writing," that

> politics are simply a subdivision of immutable ethics; that there are certain rights of men in all places and all times, which are the sole and sufficient foundation of all government, and that accordingly a single stereotype government is to make the tour of the world—and you have no more right to deprive a Dyak of his vote in a "possible" Polynesian Parliament, than you have to steal his mat.

Here again, we see that the pertinence of Bagehot's political reflections is not limited to the nineteeth century.

The difficult insight that Bagehot is everywhere at pains to communicate is that not all things are possible at all times and all places. If political liberty is a precious possession, it is forged in a long development

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of civilization, much of which is distinctly, and necessarily, illiberal. Hence the advantage of binocular vision, which allowed Bagehot, even as he was extolling Louis Napoleon's coup, to risk his life helping the republicans build barricades. This was not an expression of irony or inconstancy on Bagehot's part; it was an expression of political realism. As he put it later in "Caesarism As It Now Exists" (1865), the Second Empire is "an admirable government for present and coarse purposes, but a detestable government for future and refined purposes." One can help prepare for the future; one must live in the present.

The insights that found preliminary expression in Bagehot's letters on Louis Napoleon's coup recur again and again in his writings. They received their most complete development in what many consider Bagehot's masterpiece: *Physics and Politics*, a sequence of essays that he began serializing in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1867. This was some eight years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and five years before Herbert Spencer's *Study of Sociology*. "Social Darwinism" was in the air. The long subtitle of Bagehot's book—"Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of 'Natural Selection' and 'Inheritance' to Political Society"—clearly suggests that it belongs to that unpromising genre. As always with Bagehot, however, things are not as straightforward as they at first seem. By "physics" Bagehot means "science," more particularly "Darwinism." But the great theme of his book is "the political prerequisites of progress." How has mankind managed to move from savagery to civilization? Bagehot approvingly quotes various works by Spencer and T. H. Huxley; he refers on and off to the "transmitted nerve element" and other Lamarckian museum pieces; but he early on makes it clear that in invoking the idea of natural selection he is merely "searching out and following up an analogy."

Bagehot has (of course) two main ideas: first, the enormous difficulty our forefathers must have faced in establishing *any* political order or rule of law. "What this rule is," Bagehot remarks, "does not matter so much. A good rule is better than a bad one, but any rule is better than none." Second, the enormous difficulty later ages always face in advancing beyond the order that made their own existence possible. The first step—inaugurating law, custom, and habit—is the hardest; but history proper begins with the next step: "What is most evident is not the difficulty of getting fixed law, but getting out of a fixed law; not of cementing . . . a cake of custom, but of breaking the cake of custom; not of making the first preservative habit, but of breaking through it, and reaching something better." The perennial problem—and the book's admonitory theme—is that "history is strewn with the wrecks of nations which have gained a little progressiveness at the cost of a great deal of hard manliness, and have thus prepared themselves for destruction as soon as the movements of the world gave a chance for it." Bagehot traces the vicissitudes of this dialectic through various stages from "The Preliminary Age"—that is, the rude time of prehistory when "the strongest killed the weakest as they could"—to modern times, "The Age of Discussion."

It is naturally "the age of discussion"—the age of political liberty—that Bagehot ultimately extols. But he is ever at pains to remind his readers of the harsh prerequisites of civilization, which include war, slavery, and gross inequity. Government by discussion, Bagehot is quick to acknowledge, is "a principal organ for improving mankind." At the same time, he insists that "it is a plant of singular delicacy." The question of how best to nurture this delicate plant is Bagehot's final problem. Part of the answer is in facing up to the unpalatable realities about power that make civilization possible. The other part lies in embracing what Bagehot calls "animated moderation," that "union of life with measure, of spirit with reasonableness," which assures that discussion will continue without descending into violence or anarchy. It seems like a small thing. But then achieved order always does—until it is lost.

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Partying on Parnassus: the New York School Poets

by John Simon

David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*[1] examines the lives, work, and influence of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler in what seems to be order of importance. To put my cards on the table, as Lehman would have a critic do, I declare that none of these poets has written what I would call a single poem of any importance, although some of them have written plausible light verse.

Lehman states the problem succinctly:

> Though he is America's best-known poet, with a strong readership in Britain and a larger international following than any of his contemporaries, Ashbery remains an issue and for some a litmus test. A respected editor declared that one cannot like both Ashbery and Philip Larkin, and though I feel that one can, I understand the logic of her position. Ashbery's poetic assumptions are the opposite of Larkin's. Larkin set store by his sincerity and his control; Ashbery by his fancy and his abandon. If your sense of literary tradition extends from Keats and the Romantics to Emerson and Whitman and from there to Wallace Stevens, Ashbery's your man; if, on the other hand, you derive your sense of tradition from Thomas Hardy and William Butler Yeats, Ashbery will seem a renegade.

1 *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, by David Lehman; Doubleday, 433 pages, $27.50.

Except that I would not abandon Keats and the Romantics to the other camp, and would not limit my tradition to Hardy and Yeats, I agree with this assessment, and especially with the "respected editor." To like what I consider anti-poetry as much as poetry bespeaks not catholicity but wishy-washiness, which, to be sure, has been enshrined as a virtue in our time. Does my attitude, then, entitle me to review Lehman's book?

It would be a sorry state of affairs in which, say, books on religion could be reviewed only by true believers. There are at least two sides to every question, and a critical dialogue should be just that—a dialogue. Surely Lehman would not be content with preaching only to the converted and gathering their encomia in his collection plate.

So, by way of further laying down of cards, let me state my idea of poetry. It comprises music, painting (imagery), insight, and pregnancy or memorableness of utterance, the first two, of course, in a special sense. Ambiguity, too, may be a legitimate device, but it should not be confused with the mainstay of much New York School (henceforth NYS) stuff: openness to infinite, arbitrary, private readings—*quot homines, tot sententiae*. That way lies formlessness, dissolution, anarchy, and, yes, madness, when free association, becoming too free, hurtles into dementia.

By accepting such scot-free association,

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anything the NYS poets tossed off or elucubrated could be proclaimed poetry. That these poets were closely associated with some painters (mostly of the NYS of painting) and some composers explains one of their major fallacies: the bland assumption that the procedures of the other arts could be readily appropriated by poetry, so that, for instance, the techniques of Jackson Pollock and John Cage could be applied to writing poems.

Lehman's book divides into three main parts, although he acknowledges only two. He begins with an introductory section acquainting us with the early days of his four poets at Harvard and elsewhere, and the New York literary and art scene in the Forties and Fifties—an avant-garde at odds with contemporary modes in art and life. Next come individual sections on each of the four poets, in which, however, a lot about other poets and artists figures as well. In the third part, "The Ordeal of the Avant-Garde"—although the ordeal seems to me that of the readers—we get affiliations, influences, cross-fertilizations, the work of some of the painters as both painters and poets, also the roles of some art critics, and the most recent developments involving both the heirs of the NYS and rival movements.

Lehman has been a journalist, poet, and teacher, and displays some of the virtues of each profession. He is well-read and readable, knows most of the poets and some of the painters personally, and tells good anecdotes. We also get a sense of the hangouts some of these figures frequented, and probably just enough about their personal relations as well.

John Ashbery (born 1927), Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), Kenneth Koch (born 1925), and James Schuyler (1923–1991): three out of four of them went to Harvard, three out of four wrote professional art criticism, and three were, or are, homosexual. But even in these respects there was no real odd man out. We read, "The painter Alex Katz delighted Schuyler by refusing to believe him when he said that he had attended [without graduating] Bethany College in West Virginia. 'Nah, you're Harvard,' Katz said." Koch, who has not written art criticism, "wrote plays partly for the pleasure of collaborating with painters who did the sets." And though he was the one heterosexual in the group, his friend and collaborator Larry Rivers recalled that he "talked and acted as gay as the rest."

Lehman is at his best documenting the numerous collaborations on poems, plays, and even fiction among these poets, usually in pairs, thus conveying the sense of a school. But he fails to note that, with very few exceptions (and even those not usually in the top bracket), such collaborations have proved artistically negligible.

In further pursuit of honesty, let me mention that I graded Ashbery's papers in Harry Levin's "Proust, Mann & Joyce" course at Harvard, as I did those of his classmates Donald Hall and Robert Bly. All three poets got straight As. I got to know Ashbery—slightly—only later, when we were fellow critics at *New York* magazine. I also run into him at parties. I find him reserved, civilized, and witty, dangerous only when he picks up a pen—or, actually, typewriter—to write a poem. I once reviewed his *Tennis Court Oath* unfavorably, but I did not, as Lehman claims in another book, and Richard Howard alludes to in *Alone with America*, call it garbage. I merely quoted from the autobiographical poem "Europe" the line "He had mistaken his book for garbage," adding that "I do not think it is up to us to know better than the poet."

I knew Koch at Harvard equally slightly. He did me the kindness of getting a couple of my poems into the *Harvard Advocate*, on whose board he was. Frank O'Hara I would glimpse around Harvard, and probably spoke to at the Poets' Theatre, where he was very active and I acted in two plays. I never laid eyes on James Schuyler, and for a long time knew him only as the librettist of Paul Bowles's *Picnic Cantata*, an LP of which I own and enjoy.

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I must also state that the review of Ashbery's play *The Compromise* in the Cambridge broadsheet *Audience* was not, as Lehman speculates, by me; everything I published there was signed, as the byline was one's only recompense. I learn from Lehman that this review, though mostly favorable, elicited an "Ode," jointly written by O'Hara and Schuyler, that starts out lampooning me and then proceeds to one of the "harmonious workings of two 'quite singular' sensibilities." The best lines, as quoted by Lehman, begin: "if I did go out on the fire escape and piss on myself in the rain/ which is, I suppose, the male equivalent of a good cry/ I might not ever want to come in again/ I would be emptying myself forever like a masthead for love." Who, I wonder, in this harmonious outpouring, is the pisser on the fire escape, O'Hara or Schuyler? For all their kindred sensibilities, they were not, after all, Siamese twins.

To be sure, some of the NYS poets had, as I learn from the book, uncanny resemblances: "On different occasions both Ashbery's mother and O'Hara's companion were fooled [on the phone] into thinking that one was the other." Even in the flesh, with her back turned, Mrs. Ashbery once mistook Frank for her son. And sure enough, many a NYS poem could have been written by another member of the group.

Which is not to say that there are no salient differences. French, of which they were fond, has apt terms for all four of our poets—what I would call the 4F categories. For Ashbery, *fumiste*; for O'Hara, *flâneur*; for Koch, *farceur*; and for Schuyler, "who was prone to psychotic fits [and] spent most of his life in and out of psychiatric institutions," *fou*. Let me investigate them, and Lehman's treatment of them, one by one. If what follows is more a polemic than a review, let me point out that Lehman's book is more a panegyric than a serious work of criticism.

For Ashbery—whom the poet-critic Thomas M. Disch refers to as "the poet-laureate of spaciness," whom James Dickey called "a very difficult and perhaps impossible poet," and about whom William Arrowsmith wrote, "I have no idea most of the time what Mr. Ashbery is talking about or being . . . his characteristic gesture is an effete and cerebral whimsy"—Lehman has nothing but praise. In *Beyond Amazement*, a collection of essays about Ashbery that he edited and contributed to, Lehman declared, "Ashbery's poetry [is] far from inaccessible; on the contrary, it could be said to open up a path of entry to whole areas of consciousness that could not otherwise be reached."

In *The Last Avant-Garde*, Lehman holds up many poems and passages from Ashbery for our admiration. Here, from what is described as one of his "most admired" poems, is the beginning:

> They dream only of America
> To be lost among the thirteen million
> pillars of grass
> "This honey is delicious
> *Though it burns the throat*"
>
> And hiding from darkness in barns
> They can be grownups now
> And the murderer's ashtray is more
> easily—
> The lake a lilac cube
>
> He holds a key in his right hand
> "Please," he asks willingly,
> He is thirty years old. . . .

It seems that "it is possible to read this haunting poem as an allegory about the poet's relationship to Pierre Martory." Martory was Ashbery's lover for some of the ten years the poet lived in Paris. How such a relationship lends itself to allegory—and just what here is allegorical as opposed to, say, aleatoric—is not explained. But to give you a sense of Lehman the exegete, take "the strangeness of the adverb in the line '"Please," he asks willingly,' is not easily explained, and that is one of its virtues." What its other virtues are, we are not told.

Now here is something from a later piece,

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"A Love Poem," one of "the great works of [Ashbery's] maturity":

> The dripping is in the walls, within sleep
> Itself. I mean there is no escape
> From me, from it. The night is itself asleep
> And what goes on in it, the naming of
> the wind. Our notes to each other, always
> repeated, always the same.

Such marvels came from Ashbery "for more than thirty years, as long a stretch of sustained creative productivity as any American poet has enjoyed." And why not, if one considers Ashbery's method, as described in an earlier Lehman book, *The Line Forms Here*: "Ashbery approaches his typewriter once a week or so to write poetry, confident that he will tap his unconscious in the very act of tapping the keys." And "should the phone ring during the hour or so . . . he'll welcome the interruption—and allow it to modify the poem in progress."

Lehman's hero-worship of the NYS's *chef d'école* is often ludicrous bordering on the pitiful. When Ashbery goes to France on a Fulbright, he is "like the hero in a medieval romance embarking on a test, a quest, and an adventure." When W. H. Auden, not caring much for either O'Hara's or Ashbery's submission to the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1956, nevertheless had to choose between them, he "was as though thrust into the position of God choosing between the gifts of Cain and Abel." And Lehman adds, "The competition for Auden's nod stands somewhere behind the epistolary quarrel between O'Hara and Ashbery on the question of which of the two was more like the James Dean figure in Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1956)." Lehman devotes the next three pages to the running argument between two silly queens (my term) about who looked more like James Dean.

Gush like "brilliant," "seminal," and "diabolically clever" proliferates. "Ashbery's poems," we read,

> defeat the analytical methods. . . . Like mysterious equations in which the terms take on multiple values, they cannot be easily reduced to syllogisms. The effort to make conventional sense of the poems would be wasted; rather, the reader should approach them without preconception, or with the willingness to allow expectation to be dashed. ["Please," we should say willingly.] For Ashbery . . . the poem is the performance of experience rather than the commentary on the experience. [By that token, the performance of a sexual act, say, is a poem. Does it even have to be written down?] So radical a departure from the norm is this that critics today are still catching up with poems Ashbery composed nearly half a century ago.

Personally, I have given up trying to catch up with them; I prefer to keep a safe distance.

The reader can conclude from what I have quoted, or from any poem of Ashbery's he might open by way of *sortes Vergilianae*, that all this is sheer camping, sheer nonsense, or, as the French would call it, *fumisterie*. A *fumiste* is, literally, an oven repairman or chimney sweep. The fin-de-siècle wits, with regard to all the smoke and obfuscation, turned the word into argot for a fake artist or pretentious poetaster, or, as the Larousse has it, a *mystificateur, mauvais plaisant*. Or an Ashbery. We read, "Poems are 'going on all the time in my head and I occasionally spin off a length,' Ashbery has said." That's the old sausage machine method: you let the meat be ground a while, then you arbitrarily cut it off, wrap it in casing, and presto, a sausage—I mean, a poem.

But Ashbery's greatness is not confined to his poetry. His "incidental literary criticism adds more to our literary knowledge than any score of scholarly dissertations." That may indeed be true when you consider Lehman's idea of a scholarly dissertation. After quoting from a poem of O'Hara's in which "the most ordinary of activities seems endowed with a nobility"—to wit "the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,/ Which they'll soon tear down. I/ used to think they had the Armory/ Show there"—Lehman

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comments, "A thesis could be written on O'Hara's error." I dare say twenty such might begin to equal one piece of Ashbery's incidental criticism.

What, however, about Lehman's criticism? In *The Last Avant-Garde*, he speculates a good deal about a relationship between Ashbery's titles, with which the poet begins, and their texts, with the text of a poem having apparently nothing to do with its title. He must have forgotten his interview with Ashbery, in which the poet pronounced,

> Very often my poems diverge from the areas or concerns the title has announced, and I think it's profitable in this way to add a further dimension to poetry. I mean, one can write a poem "To a Waterfowl" [as Ashbery has done, stooping to despoil poor Bryant] that has nothing to do with waterfowls, and the reader is obliged to consider the poem as somehow related to the subject indicated only in the title.

If this is not *fumisterie*, I don't know what is: not only writing the poem to a cheaply prankish title, but also erecting a whole *ars poetica* on this campy procedure. To be sure, Lehman opines, "camp, like any other style, can furnish the technical means to ends that are serious and complex." Accordingly, he reports seriously that "Ashbery persuaded Koch that 'shapely as an amoeba' was a better simile than 'shapeless as an amoeba.'" This is what Lehman calls "the poets [getting] a contact high from one another." With equal seriousness, he quotes Ashbery: "As I have gotten older, it seems to me that time is what I have been writing about during all these years when I thought I wasn't writing about anything." Proof, I think, that one should always trust one's first impressions.

About Frank O'Hara, Lehman has scarcely less reverential things to say, although none as poignant as this sentence: "O'Hara's father died while he was at Harvard, and his journals of the period show him in a soul-searching mood." (Given Lehman's faulty syntax, one wonders how this poetical father, dying at Harvard as a mere youth, found time for marriage, procreation, and soul-searching.) Son Frank, however, was an unsoul-searching *flâneur*. Most of his poems are street poems (derived from Apollinaire's *poème promenade*) in which O'Hara records his *flâneries*, or else "list poems" in which he enumerates whatever comes to his mind with perfect Whitmania. "Personal Poem," for example, begins with a walk at lunchtime, then describes meeting up with LeRoi Jones. They walk and eat together as the poem continues:

> we get some fish and some ale it's
> cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
> we decide. We like Don Allen we don't like
> Henry James so much we like Herman
> Melville. . . .

and ends:

> I wonder if one person out of the
> 8,000,000 is
> thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
> and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
> back to work happy at the thought possibly so

Note the absurd use, or lack, of punctuation and the inane enjambment that, as the NYS fantasizes, turns prose into poetry. But Lehman evaluates, "So casual and spontaneous is this poem, so committed to the rhythms of actual speech, that the reader may not even hear the closing rhyme. And that is as it should be: the music is at the heart of the noise, the poetry something subtle in the midst of all that seems wildly antipoetic." The poem is thirty-four wildly antipoetic lines long, but ends with two lines rhyming, albeit so discreetly we may not even notice it, and indeed shouldn't. Yet the rhyme is "the music at the heart of the noise," the hidden poetry for whose sake we must put up with thirty-two lines of noise. What Lehman fails to mention is that all thirty-four lines, rhyming or not, are equally banal.

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There is no end to the grandiose claims Lehman makes for the Four Horsemen of the NYS. Thus a verse about a bank teller, "Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)," "has an interest beyond the sass in the speaker's voice, it helps evoke a once commonplace situation remote from us today, used as we have been to automatic teller machines and the universal American first-name basis." The source of the line is "The Day Lady Died," a putative elegy for Billie Holiday. It is not until the concluding five lines of the poem that O'Hara remembers Lady Day, which Lehman justifies as putting "the poem into the company of other great elegies, notably Milton's 'Lycidas.'" So, too, we learn that "O'Hara's poetic preoccupation with Miles Davis . . . and with Billie Holiday . . . is evidence less of white-negroism than of peerless aesthetic taste." The grand conclusion is "it could be said that if all that survived of 1959 was 'The Day Lady Died,' then historians a century hence could piece together the New York of that moment." Note the poor grammar and syntax, and poorer judgment.

Gilding by association, as in O'Hara-Milton, is one of Lehman's favorite ploys. Kenneth Koch's "poems are unthinkable without a meat-and-potatoes diet of Ovid, Ariosto, Lorca, Pasternak, Mayakovsky, and a dozen French poets," though Lehman doesn't make clear for whom this diet is prescribed: the poet, the reader, or both. He situates Koch in the tradition of satire's "greatest practitioners," Pope and Byron, as he elsewhere brackets Schuyler with Montaigne. Koch's poetry "demands to be read in the context of . . . Rabelais, Lord Byron, Lewis Carroll, and Oscar Wilde," even as Ashbery is "in the visionary company" of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Stevens. O'Hara and Schuyler "revised the lyric model" of Whitman, Crane, and Williams, and "Ashbery resembles Kierkegaard in the quality of his irony."

Such gilt by association climaxes in the comparison of Koch's two circus poems, "Circus" and the much later "Circus II," which Lehman uses both in class and in public lectures. To choose between them, it seems, is to choose, as Lehman asks his hearers to do, "between art and life. In terms derived from William Blake," one stands for innocence, the other for experience. "In Schiller's terms, the first 'Circus' is naïve, the second sentimental. . . . In Wallace Stevens's terms, the first represents the principle of the imagination, the second that of reality." Indeed, "the second is like Koch's version of Coleridge's 'Dejection Ode.'" All this show apropos of two poems by our *farceur* from which I quote:

> "What is death in the circus? That depends on
> if it's spring.
> Then, if elephants are there, *mon père*, we are
> not completely lost.
> Oh the sweet strong odor of beasts which
> laughs at decay!
> Decay! Decay! we are like the elements
> in a kaleidoscope
> But such passions we feel! bigger than
> the beaches and
> Rustier than harpoons." After this speech
> the circus practitioner sat down.

And the second:

> I never mentioned my friends in my poems
> at the time I wrote The Circus
> Although they meant almost more than
> anything to me
> Of this now for some time I've felt
> an attenuation
> So I'm mentioning them maybe this will
> bring them back to me
> Not them perhaps but what I felt about them
> John Ashbery Jane Freilicher Larry Rivers
> Frank O'Hara
> their names alone bring tears to my eyes. . . .

As to which of the poems is greater, Lehman avers, "I know the answer, but my lips are sealed," surely an aporia worthy of Jesting Pilate.

It should not surprise us that Lehman, as he says, decided to become a poet when taking his only writing course ever as a

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Columbia sophomore from Koch, and also by reading Donald Allen's notorious anthology *The New American Poetry*—and especially O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" contained in it. This "made poetry seem as natural as breathing, as casual as the American idiom, and so imbued with metropolitan irony and bohemian glamour as to be irresistible." He does not, however, tell us what made him also espouse literary criticism, samples of which follow.

"Koch, our funniest poet, has had the misfortune to be a protean genius at a moment when the lyric poem is the be-all and end-all of verse and is mistakenly held to be incompatible with the spirit of comedy." It is elementary knowledge that comic verse has never fallen out of esteem, but is held, now as before, to be light verse rather than poetry, with the exception of Pope and Byron, Chaucer and some epigrams by Rochester and Belloc. Koch, whose entire output traffics in sometimes funny, sometimes unfunny burlesque verse, has not been critically shortchanged.

Now here is Lehman on James Schuyler, whose "Freely Espousing" is "a brief statement of his poetics." For Schuyler, "who is sparing with figurative language, the literal description suffices more often than not, making similes seem supererogatory." So Lehman quotes admiringly from the above-mentioned poem: "The sinuous beauty of words like allergy/ the tonic resonance of/ pill when used as in/ 'she is a pill'/ on the other hand I am not going to espouse any short stories in which lawn mowers clack." After quoting from another Schuyler poem, "there is a dull book with me,/ an apple core, cigarettes,/ an ashtray," Lehman comments, "the unembellished 'apple core' is sufficient to suggest the mythic dimensions of another lost garden paradise."

This kind of associative diarrhea is frequent. Koch told a student that "The Lost Golf Ball" would be a good title for an abstract painting because, though people looking for the ball would not find it, "they'll look more closely at the painting." From this, Lehman leaps to these lines of Schuyler's: "Kenneth Koch/ could teach a golf ball/ how to write pantoums," as if this juxtaposition shed critical light on either poet. Similarly, from among questions "as compelling today as when Koch first asked them," Lehman cites "Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants?"; Lehman then finds a "shared aesthetic" in the following from "Personism," O'Hara's poetic manifesto: "that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you." A manifesto all right, but not exactly a poetic one.

Again, the ending of Schuyler's "Korean Mums" is "a notable example of an allegory emerging from literal truth": "what/ is there I have not forgot?/ or one day will forget;/ this garden, the breeze/ in stillness, even/ the words, Korean mums." But does not all allegory take off from a literal meaning, and just what is allegorized here? Lehman perceives "a case of exact identity between 'the words' and what they mean." Is *that* the allegory then? Lehman probably knows, but once again prefers to keep mum. Or mums.

Here is a further example from Ashbery, who "does to conventional syntax what Robespierre did to the monarchy." "When the poet remarks . . . that we . . . 'have been given no help whatever/ In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely/ On second-hand knowledge' the *hand* in that phrase vibrates with meaning, like the sound of one hand clapping." Has exegesis ever been more elucidating? So, too, when O'Hara writes "to be more revolutionary than a nun/ is our desire, to be secular and intimate/ as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile/ and pull the trigger," Lehman helpfully explicates that it "is conceivable that the 'redcoat' O'Hara envisions was a coat of red paint," though I am more inclined to see it as a coat to be worn over skintight pants making everyone want to go to bed with you.

But then Lehman lauds crazy Schuyler for seeing "the poetic possibilities of the laundry list," as in this "quintessential" passage,

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"unglib, fresh, and free of fake language," from the poem "Things to Do": "Walk three miles/ a day beginning tomorrow./ Alphabetize./ Purchase nose-hair shears./ Answer letters./ Elicit others./ Write Maxine./ Move to Maine./ Give up NoCal./ See more movies./ Practice long distance dialing." How odd that Lehman doesn't see NoCal as a tribute to a fellow *fou*, Robert Lowell. But Lehman's sharpest moment comes when, in Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas of Meditation*, much admired by Ashbery, he notes that "in one poem . . . Stein places periods in the middle of sentences—an experimental move that still seems fresh today." Fresh? I'd say downright impudent.

There are, moreover, errors of every stripe. *Cadavre exquis* is not a "one-line poem"; Baudelaire is not the inventor of the prose poem, which harks back to Bertrand and Guérin, if not indeed to Evariste Parny. You cannot write "neither true or false" in good English, any more than *bête noir* in either English or French. We read that the NYS poets' pleasure would have been diminished if any of them "felt that the others' approbation were automatic." Lehman makes the common error of using *paraphrasing* to mean twisting someone else's phrase around for effect; he often misuses *supernal* for something like sublime, and he subliterately employs *critique* as a verb.

Again, a steady refrain does not *orchestrate* a poem. In a sentence about Pierre Reverdy, the singular *poetry* makes a poor antecedent for the plural "their enchantment." *Astrological* is misused for astronomical. "O'Hara's 'exoticism' of blacks" is extremely clumsy. Baudelaire's *mauvais vitrier* is a *bad* glazier, not an *evil* one, and the prose poem wherein the glazier occurs does not end with cries of "Life is beautiful!"—*Vivre en beauté* means "live in high style." But then Lehman's French allows for *jeu du* [*sic*] *paume* and *Bibliotheque de l'Arsénale* [accent missing, *arsénal* feminized], his Italian Hispanicizes Francesco Parmigianino into *Francisco*; his German takes *Schadenfreude* to mean envy.

But Lehman is at his least appealing in his continual aggrandizing, as when Ashbery becomes a "hero in a fantastic tale," because a bookstore he bought something from supposedly vanished without a trace when he next looked for it. So Koch is a "poet of the highest originality" because he "has revived the epic and the drama as viable vehicles for verse [surely that statement has been stood on its head] and revealed an uncanny knack for marrying unusual forms to unconventional matter." It takes only a cursory glance at Koch's verse drama or verse epic (and isn't epic ipso facto verse?) to ascertain the hopelessness of each. As for pantoums and sestinas, they can no more be helped by unconventional matter than that matter can be ennobled by marriage to them.

David Lehman studied with Kenneth Koch, who "convert[ed] a generation of Columbia students into sorcerer's apprentices." He was the colleague of John Ashbery both on the faculty of Brooklyn College and at *Newsweek*, where he reviewed books and Ashbery art. With *The Last Avant-Garde*, he proffers a collegial and sorcerer's apprentice tribute to them and their NYS fellows. Whether he has rendered a similar service to his readers remains open to doubt.

In *The Line Forms Here*, Lehman wrote, "For many of us, any key or code to the poems—however ingeniously put forth—might well work to diminish rather than enhance our delight." Ashbery's poetry "induces [a] state of mystified alertness that only the most intense esthetic experiences can afford." One of Ashbery's most cited and debated nonsense phrases, "Murk plectrum," may have finally acquired its critical counterpart in Lehman's murk spectrum.

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Poems
by Phillis Levin & Daniel Mark Epstein

Georgic

in memory of Edward Thomas

If walking down a country lane
You stop to look at gathering clouds
And feel your life a prison-house,
Then think of sky

Open as pastures steeped in dew,
Mountains brightening
After thunder passes through,
A feather wavering in the light;

Or think of one
Who made a midnight requiem
From the rainfall

Of falling men,
As he lay unsleeping in mud
Warmer than some.

—Phillis Levin

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Double figure

In a vast arena
I met a double figure
Looking like my mother,
As tall as my young father,

Welcoming me.
There was something to say
So I asked politely:
Are you happy together,

When did you die?
But they were still alive
And we tore at each other

Without reason or mercy,
Remorse a dangling spider
Going without dinner.

—*Phillis Levin*

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The circle dance

Long shadows on the lawn
    Are all that's left of the night.
Mars and the moon have gone
    Under cover of dawn light.

Jenny, come down to the garden
    And see what the day has in store.
Watch the hollyhocks open,
    The crows in the sycamore;

For life is a morning shadow
    That shortens and disappears,
And the sun is a high-handed fellow
    Spinning our months into years

And days into nights to show
    This world is his roundelay.
May love like the evening shadows grow
    Till life and light pass away.

—*Daniel Mark Epstein*

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London journal

A disagreeable aroma

by John Gross

BBC Television is making a film about Wordsworth and Coleridge. Twenty or thirty years ago the idea would have caused barely a ripple. It was the kind of thing that the BBC was expected to do. But not anymore: and in a world where television has less and less time for high culture, the news could scarcely fail to be welcome.

Or could it? Some programs, however worthwhile their themes, are worse than no program at all, and such details as have so far emerged suggest this might well be one of them. Wordsworth, it appears, is going to be portrayed in it as a cold-hearted exploiter, Coleridge—the junkie of genius—as his tragic victim. We are going to be asked to accept that he deliberately encouraged Coleridge in his drug habit so that he could take advantage of his gifts (since he was plainly the lesser poet); that he drove him to the very edge of destruction; and then, when his services were no longer needed, that he calmly abandoned him. And in case we still have any doubts where our sympathies are supposed to lie, Coleridge is going to be played by one of the most sought-after stars of the moment—Robert Carlyle, who made his name in the celebrated movie about male strippers, *The Full Monty*. It's prime time material.

There is an old joke, probably going back to Victorian times, about the magazine *Punch*. "I'm afraid it's not what it was—but then it never was." In the case of the BBC, however, it can truthfully be said that it *was*, that the reputation it built up during its first fifty or sixty years was justified. With all its faults, with all the necessary limitations of a service that has to cater to fifty million people, it achieved great things in every department from news reporting to education, from classical music to popular entertainment.

Those traditions are not yet extinct. It is a very large organization, and they still live on in isolated pockets. But the general debasing of standards in recent years is no longer seriously in question (except of course among the Corporation's own executives). Talk of dumbing down, on radio no less than television, has become commonplace in the press and among broadcasters themselves—or at any rate among the ones who haven't profited from the trend. The same coarsening, one should add, has assumed even more garish forms on commercial radio and television, but the BBC had further to fall.

What makes its decline even more significant is that it has played such a powerful institutional role in British life. As far back as the 1930s, it had already come to seem an essential part of the social fabric, an estate of the realm. It hasn't entirely lost that role, even now; but, like most other mainstream British institutions, it has taken a battering, and much of the spirit that made it what it was has drained out of it.

Literature, too, is an institution. Or, at

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any rate, it has its institutional aspects—its traditions, its means of promoting itself, its social standing; and they have lately been undergoing some curious transformations. The Wordsworth-Coleridge program is arguably more interesting from this point of view than for what it reveals about fashions in broadcasting.

Dr. Johnson thought that "the chief glory of every people arises from its authors," but then he had never been to a megastar pop concert or a World Cup soccer match. We live in a different world, and there can be no doubt that literature has lost some of the public esteem it enjoyed even a generation ago—not so much through being deliberately demoted as through being edged to one side, or put on a level with achievements of a lower order.

Individual examples of this downhill process are so common that it is easy to forget them, but occasionally one of them is sufficiently picturesque to linger in the mind. In 1996, for instance, the British Post Office had a slot left open for a commemorative stamp. The year marked the centenary of the death of William Morris; representations were duly made to the authorities asking for the stamp to carry his portrait (and you might have thought they would have been ready to commemorate him on the strength of his wallpaper alone). In the event, however, he was passed over in favor of Muffin the Mule, a puppet from the early days of BBC television. For anyone who recalls Morris's visions of a democratic future, it was an incident rich in irony, but it was too symptomatic of current values to raise much of a smile.

One mustn't exaggerate. The writers of the past continue to be honored, even if it is generally in a more muted fashion than before, but the effect is often simply to underline how much England has changed. In the town of Bedford, for example, there is a school named after a distinguished local son, the nineteenth-century novelist Mark Rutherford ("so thorough, so sound and so beautiful"—D. H. Lawrence), which has recently been in the news on account of a particularly nasty outbreak of drug dealing. We needn't be sentimental—Mark Rutherford's England was often a hard, mean place; but at least there were some problems which it was spared. And you wonder what George Orwell would have made of the goings-on at a school named after him, which is currently threatened with closure. He was a man of few illusions, but even he might have been faintly surprised to hear one of the school governors denounce it at a meeting with parents as "a crap school." (Such is the idiom in which a good deal of public debate is now conducted.)

Even when a writer is commemorated in a strictly literary context, the disparity between what he stood for and what is being done in his name can often seem fairly grotesque. This year's T. S. Eliot Prize has been awarded to a poet called Don Paterson, described as "a new lad," for a volume entitled *God's Gift to Women*. He received his check at the awards ceremony from Eliot's widow, but the occasion was chiefly notable for a speech from the director of the Poetry Book Society, which administers the prize. She informed the audience that "he is a man and he is interested in trains and girls' legs, but he knows that is not politically correct, and he is grappling with the issue." By way of further reassurance, she added that "there is a good deal of tenderness and sensitivity, and also a lot of irony in his work." Oh, irony, irony.

Or take the case of the G. M. Young Lectureship. Young (who might have been sent into the world to counterbalance Lytton Strachey) was the most eloquent historian of Victorian civilization of his generation. The Lectureship, which was established in Oxford after his death, is currently held by the poet Tom Paulin, who has just published a book on Hazlitt—a book by no means without merit, but one in which Paulin finds it necessary to slam Matthew Arnold for his "bland" doctrine of disinterestedness. Bland as preached and practiced by Arnold, that is. Paulin concedes that there can be such a thing as fruitful disin-

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teredness; to illustrate what he means by it, he holds up the example of Susan Sontag.

As for the presentation of writers in plays, documentaries, newspaper features, and so forth, it all depends. To the extent that they can be shown to have been "transgressive," they are liable to be acclaimed. (If he was interested in his television image, it was clearly a foolish move for Wordsworth not to get involved with opium.) The most interesting thing about other, less radical writers is generally assumed to be their personal weaknesses.

"Dumbing down" doesn't seem quite the right term for this phenomenon. Perhaps "dumbing up" would be more appropriate, since the favored tone is generally knowing and (up to a point) sophisticated. A good example of what I have in mind was recently provided by the British film critic Anthony Lane in the spread of tributes to Tina Brown on her departure from *The New Yorker*. He recalls telling her about *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard's play about A. E. Housman, and the brilliance and prescience of her response: "Is Housman hot?" It was brilliant because, as he explains, "hot" is hardly the first word you would think of in connection with Housman. ("'Cold' would be more apposite. . . .") It was prescient, because by the time Stoppard's play gets to New York, Housman *is* going to be hot. (Whether he is still going to be Housman is another matter.) Lane also cherishes fond memories of a conversation he had with Tina Brown after he had followed up a piece on Edward Lear with a piece on T. S. Eliot: "We decided that I should be appointed official S.L.F. correspondent. It stood for Sad Lonely Fucks."

And not to join in such talk is no doubt to be marked down as an S.L.F. yourself. Or at any rate not to pretend to join in. In most new plays that get out in London, for example, if they have any pretensions to seriousness, the four-letter words fall like rain. I don't believe this reflects the way most educated English people speak, but everyone has been browbeaten into accepting the convention.

Occasionally, it is true, a writer still manages to provoke a few complaints: Irvine Welsh, for example, the author of the loathsome *Trainspotting*, which has enjoyed three lives as a best-selling novel, a successful play, and a wildly successful film. Welsh's specialties are drugs and excrement, but last year he extended his range somewhat further with a ninety-minute play about murder, culminating in anal rape. It drew almost universally bad reviews, and a number of protests—chiefly on account of the fact that when it finished its run it set out on a European tour subsidized by the British Council (and hence indirectly by the taxpayer). The complaints were brushed aside by a British Council spokesman, however, with something close to contempt: people who objected just didn't know good British art when they saw it.

More recently, when the Secretary of State for Scotland expressed doubts about whether Welsh and other Scottish writers in the same vein represented the best the country could do, he made equally little impression. And now we have Welsh's latest novel, the tale of an unspeakable policeman entitled *Filth*. At the Edinburgh Festival this summer, and elsewhere too, the posters for it have been inescapable: printed in a variety of tasteful colors, they show a pig wearing a policeman's helmet. (A few individual policemen have said that it upsets them, but the booksellers are standing firm.)

There are better things going on in Britain in 1998 than the ones I have been writing about: I would be sorry if anyone took them for the whole story. But they are a substantial part of the story, and they undoubtedly help to give the current scene its distinctive, not very agreeable aroma.

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Theater

Broadway blues

by Mark Steyn

Sammy Cahn, one of this country's most successful pop song writers, once recalled to me a conversation he'd had with Ira Gershwin. Cahn, riding high on the Hit Parade, was complaining about some irritating little problem he was having with his publisher. "I wouldn't know about that," said Gershwin, "but then, I've never written any hits." At this point in his account of the incident, Cahn's neck rose eighteen inches out of his collar and he screwed up his face in disbelief: "*Ira Gershwin*! Never written any *hits*??"

Well, no, not really. What Gershwin meant was that, unlike Cahn, he'd never come up with any instant smashes for Frank Sinatra or Doris Day. Instead, he wrote songs for specific dramatic situations in Broadway shows. Although a few of them stepped out to become favorites with dance bands or on the radio, most of those took years—sometimes decades—to establish themselves. In our collective memory, we think of the Twenties and Thirties as one long glorious Gershwin melody, with occasional breaks for Cole Porter. But at the time you'd have been more likely to hear "Yes, We Have No Bananas" or "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas." At the 1937 Academy Awards, the Gershwins' "They Can't Take That Away From Me" lost to that synthetic-fibred grass-skirt number, "Sweet Leilani."

Things had changed by the time Ira Gershwin died in 1983. A couple of years back, according to one performance survey, the world's most sung lyricists were Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Today, in the centenary year of Ira's brother, Gershwin is everywhere: *Porgy and Bess* is just about the only opera written since Puccini's death that anyone wants to see; in the world's concert halls, the clarinet glissando in the opening bars of *Rhapsody in Blue* has become the most recognizable musical embodiment of the American century; and among rock stars the cachet of the Gershwin name has spurred recent unnerving recordings of his songs by the likes of Sinèad O'Connor, Meat Loaf, and Bon Jovi. In fact, the only place you can be sure of *not* hearing Gershwin in this centenary season is . . . Broadway.

We have become used to the silence of the Great White Way when the anniversaries of its greatest sons roll round. Thus, the Eugene O'Neill centenary in 1988 was a cause not for celebration but for forlorn reflection that, were the defining American playwright writing nowadays, he'd be lucky to be playing to a couple of dozen half-price ticket buyers in the East Village: the *Iceman* cometh to Broadway no longer. The New York theater is routinely criticized for living in the past, but in reality it doesn't even do that terribly well. The most you can expect is that someone will screw in a nameplate: I once attended a meeting in the Marriott Marquis Hotel's Bertolt Brecht conference room, which is right next to the Florenz Ziegfeld conference room, and no doubt were the old brute around to attend con-

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ferences in it (he too is a child of 1898), would confirm Brecht in his low opinion of American capitalism. But George Gershwin's absence is more than just the usual omission: he's not just symbolic of Broadway in happier times, he personifies Broadway's function in the wider culture.

The New York Times chose to mark the centenary by running three essays—by Paul Simon from the rock crowd; by William Bolcom from the highbrow end; and by Stanley Crouch from the black perspective. Bolcom mentions "Broadway" twice, but only to emphasize how Gershwin differed from his contemporaries; Simon mentions "Broadway" once, en passant; and Crouch uses the word not at all. Possibly all three assume that most readers know that Gershwin devoted the bulk of his professional life to writing Broadway scores. More likely, they're simply reflecting the irrelevance of Broadway to the contemporary scene. For most commentators, George Gershwin is the man who crossed the tracks—from "the street" to Carnegie Hall, as Simon sees it: on the one hand, he wrote popular songs, on the other, operas and concert works. But this view of Gershwin's "two sides" misses the point: it was Broadway that helped him across those tracks.

As his remarks to Sammy Cahn make plain, Ira Gershwin never thought of himself as a pop songwriter. His brother felt the same way. It was at the wedding of his Aunt Kate that the teenage George heard two songs from Jerome Kern's *The Girl from Utah*—"You're Here and I'm Here" and "They Didn't Believe Me"—and decided to quit being a Tin Pan Alley song-plugger. "Kern was the first composer," he said, "who made me conscious that most popular music was of inferior quality and that musical-comedy music was made of better material." It was writing for Broadway that enabled Gershwin to expand his musical vocabulary: even in the Twenties, even in the frothiest farces, the theater required composers who could write for trios and sextets, and on subjects other than straightforward moon/June courtship. George's first effort at a long-form work, the twenty-five minute "tragic jazz opera" *Blue Monday*, was written for the 1922 edition of *George White's Scandals*, a quintessential "tired businessman" revue whose other offerings included a girly Garden of Eden number and W. C. Fields in a sketch about early radio. By the end of the decade, the Gershwins had progressed to a kind of Broadway Gilbert and Sullivan in a trio of satirical operettas. Although the libretti have dated, these shows gave George the chance to compose recitative and extended musical scenes. Ira's drollness leavens the musical complexity: in *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933), as the President and his sweetheart are purring their love song, the ensemble provides a contrapuntal commentary:

Wintergreen	Ensemble
Mine!	The point they're making in the song
Love is mine!	Is that they more than get along. . . .

Porgy and Bess, of course, has greater seriousness of purpose. But its virtues are Broadway virtues—beginning with the opening number. In, say, a Verdi opera, the first number is no more or less than the number that happens to come first. But, in a Broadway musical, the first song bears greater burdens: it has to communicate the tone of the piece, its atmosphere, its concerns. For *Porgy*, Gershwin wrote that languorous lullaby "Summertime"—nothing much to do with storyline or dramatis personae, but it transports us immediately to Catfish Row in Charleston. By the time the chorus joins in the harmony, the song has become the motif for the community and imbued it with a spiritual dimension. In a way, Catfish Row is a character in the drama, and nothing could define it better than the combination of Gershwin's notes and DuBose Heyward's words: "Summertime/ And the livin' is easy/ Fish are jumpin'/ And the cotton is high. . . ." Pace Ira Gershwin, "Summertime" is also a hit—one of the ten most-recorded songs of all time.

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According to Terry Teachout in a recent issue of *Commentary*, George's interests "extended far beyond the field of show music." But all of the above *is* "show music": not just "Embraceable You" and "Fascinating Rhythm" and "Someone to Watch Over Me," but also *Blue Monday*, and *Of Thee I Sing*'s musicalized "Impeachment Proceeding," and "My Man's Gone Now" in *Porgy*. "Show music," all of it—music written for Broadway, introduced on Broadway.

In England, no-one worries that barrow boys don't whistle Benjamin Britten; in France, even motion pictures are encouraged to be elitist. The notion that serious art should be popular and popular art should be serious is a peculiarly American obsession, driven at least in part by the Republic's sense of itself. It's no surprise that it should be the predominant theme of the Gershwin centenary musings. But it's odd that no one should think it worth remarking on the obvious—that the most successful riders of these twin horses have been Broadway men. Gershwin was not a pop songwriter who suddenly became an operatic composer: he was a Broadway composer whose work crossed over both to the Hit Parade and to the opera house. Broadway in its heyday represented the dynamic middle ground of American culture, a place that could accommodate not only Irving Berlin and Frank Loesser but also Leonard Bernstein and Kurt Weill. Broadway enabled Gershwin. It's unlikely that a guy sitting in a Tin Pan Alley piano cubicle cranking out "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em; When You Get 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em" is going to go straight from there to the *Concerto in F*. But, for an ambitious songwriter, a Broadway show offered a logical progression: if you were good at writing short forms (songs), maybe you'd be good at writing short forms in a long form (a musical play); and, if you could manage that, maybe you stood a chance of graduating to long forms proper.

Nor was Gershwin that much of an exception. It would be pointless to get into an argument as to which members of "the classical period of popular music" (in Oscar Levant's words) were best: in some ways, Gershwin is less harmonically ambitious than Kern or Porter, but so what? All Broadway's big names can hold their own, measure for measure, with old-time songwriters like Schubert. Two notes in Kern's "All The Things You Are"—the enharmonic change where the release returns to the main theme—testify as eloquently as *Porgy* to the ambition and the literacy of Broadway in this period. "All The Things You Are" was a hit at the time for Tommy Dorsey and Artie Shaw and has remained a favorite with discriminating singers and instrumentalists ever since. To listen to Axel Stordahl's gossamer-spun string arrangement for the young Sinatra in 1945 is to marvel at a lost world; how can anything that exquisite, that tender, that majestically intimate be . . . *pop music*?

Well, it's not—not technically: it's Broadway music that happened to become popular. But, in Gershwin's day, Broadway was an aspirational milieu: almost all his fellow songwriters were looking for the long form, however you might define that. Kern progressed from Wodehousian musical comedy to the first Broadway epic, *Show Boat* (1927); Rodgers from "My Funny Valentine" and "The Lady is a Tramp" to a fusion of speech, underscoring, recitative, song, and movement in *Carousel* (1945). A more typical comparison is a composer born the day after Gershwin, Vincent Youmans. Alas, his centenary seems to have passed almost without notice, though the contours of his life are not so very different from his chum George's. Both men wrote songs with Ira Gershwin, though both enjoyed their biggest pop hits with another lyricist, Irving Caesar: Gershwin and Caesar wrote "Swanee," Youmans and Caesar wrote "Tea For Two." Both men provided some of the most enduring standards in the pop and jazz repertoire, but both were also admired by "serious" composers: Gershwin by Ravel; Youmans by Shostakovich, who found "Tea For Two" so intriguing he wrote his own arrangement of it. Both died young:

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Gershwin in 1937, Youmans in 1946. Ill-health prevented Youmans from producing as vast and as varied a body of work as Gershwin, but he, too, had his ambitions: the last time his name appeared on a theater bill was in Baltimore in 1944 for the try-out of *Vincent Youmans' Ballet Revue*: music by Ravel and Rimsky-Korsakov among others, choreography by Massine, and a complete flop by anybody's standards. But that's the point: in Youmans's and Gershwin's day, the commercial theater was where you went to do such things.

The death of that dynamic middle is perhaps the biggest single change since their day. No rock writer would agree with the young Gershwin's assessment that "most popular music was of inferior quality and that musical comedy was made of better material." Shortly before his ill-fated theatrical debut in January, Paul Simon told me in no uncertain terms how awful he thought current Broadway music was, from the autopilot big band riffs of *The Life* to the faux rock of *Rent*. Yet, at the same time, he and Billy Joel and the other rock colossi are incredibly frustrated: they want to move on like Gershwin—but how? When the Gershwins teamed up with Rouben Mamoulian and DuBose Heyward and a bunch of opera singers, it clicked. When Simon signed up Derek Walcott and Mark Morris, nothing clicked: the dynamic middle—the meeting ground of American culture—is gone. *Porgy and Bess* was not a freak: there were all kinds of "Broadway operas" by longhair composers floating around in the Thirties and Forties—from Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* to Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*, a musicalization of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. Most of these operas are terrible, but at least in those days an opera could be terrible on Broadway. Today an opera can only be terrible in an opera house, and, strangely enough, trapped within those hallowed confines, it's usually even more terrible. Take *Harvey Milk—The Opera*, should the Met be foolish enough ever to revive it. Given that sexuality seems to have succeeded race as the great American preoccupation, *Harvey Milk* could in theory be the *Porgy and Bess* of our time. But it won't be, because such works are forged in a dynamic middle, not down one end of a sterile and polarized culture.

The history of the modern American musical falls into three rough stages. In the first phase, great songs were beached in silly plots and crude staging. In the second, the men who wrote those songs—Gershwin, Rodgers, Hammerstein, the marquee names in an age when writers were stars—managed through sheer force of will to drag everyone else—book writers, choreographers, directors—up to their level. Indeed, the directors and choreographers—Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett, Bob Fosse—got so good that it took a while before anyone noticed that the composers and lyricists had all but disappeared. There was no longer any there there.

These days, the dynamic middle is—gulp—*The Lion King*. On paper, this looks like a reinvigoration of the cultural meeting place Broadway used to be: a score by Elton John and Tim Rice—pardon me, Sir Elton John and Sir Tim Rice (everyone in British showbiz has a knighthood now)—and staging by the widely admired, avant-garde director Julie Taymor. By "avant-garde," I mean all the most tired and obvious tricks of multicultural performance art—puppets, random percussion, etc. In fairness to the devotees of this sort of thing, it does require a rigorous personal commitment: it's a good rule of thumb that anything on stage involving puppeteering and ethnic drumming lasts at least seven hours. *The Lion King*, being produced by Disney, doesn't. It's a *Reader's Digest* of avant-garde effects, served up in bite-size chunks that leave plenty of time to get back to the parking garage and home by eleven.

Disney is a very cunning organization. In Britain, many Winnie-the-Pooh fans loathe the Disney version and insist on buying their children the original models, as drawn by E. H. Shepard. What they don't seem to notice is that, whether you buy a stuffed toy

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of the Disneyfied Pooh or the so-called "Classic Pooh," it makes no difference: Disney owns and controls both, and has therefore contrived to profit even from people who dislike what they've done to the poor fellow. The same process is at work in *The Lion King*. When Disney first ventured onto Broadway with *Beauty and the Beast*, theater people complained that it wasn't theater at all, but just a souvenir reproduction of the movie. With *The Lion King*, Disney figured it out: they'd always have the film version, so they could afford to run this as the "alternative" take. They pulled off a remarkable feat: *The Lion King* is the Disneyfication of the avant-garde. The company has taken all the old staples of fringe theater and performance art and neutralized them sufficiently to transform them into money spinners. It's been grand news for Miss Taymor, who staged *The Lion King* exactly the same way she's staged everything for years in various not-for-profit operations. This time, though, it's landed her an American Express ad and a photo shoot for *Esquire*'s "Women We Love" section.

Well, good for her. What's harder to understand is why so many distinguished critics have chosen to praise the show. *The New Yorker*'s John Lahr did as he did with *Ragtime*: he raved about the production for a couple of pages and then in the penultimate paragraph conceded that, okay, the music and lyrics weren't up to much. In fact, the writers are virtually invisible on this production: Sir Elton, with an insouciance even Cole Porter might have balked at, didn't see the show until opening night; he sent his manager along to one rehearsal who after fifteen minutes got out his mobile phone and told Elt, "Relax, you don't need to worry about this." When additional music and lyrics were required, as they invariably are, Miss Taymor cobbled them together from some vaguely African-sounding incidental music Disney happened to own the rights to and some lyrics she wrote herself. Despite John Lahr's effusions, *The Lion King* does not represent a future for American theater but is merely the latest variation of its abiding problem: Broadway is not conducive to authorial expression.

Paul Simon went through this rigmarole on *The Capeman* as one hot shot director after another told him that in his "vision" of the piece he saw this character as a woman and that First Act dance as a Second Act charm song. A director's theater is fine if you've got something to direct. But the chasm between these guys' self-image and their actual talent is easily measured: when you ask them to stage a recognized classic, they fall short—they've nothing to say. That's why all the intelligent revivals come from London: the National Theatre, which produced Nicholas Hytner's *Carousel*, will soon give New York its latest "revisical," Trevor Nunn's *Oklahoma!*

But the best gauge of the diminished fortunes of music on Broadway is not the score of *Jekyll and Hyde* or *Ragtime* but the treatment Broadway producers and directors accord the old-timers themselves. The "new" Cole Porter musical *High Society* would horrify the old boy: it uses his songs far more crudely and clumsily than *Kiss Me, Kate*. And, whenever a producer's eye alights on the Gershwin catalogue, it meets the same fate. Of the two recent Gershwin compilations, *Crazy For You* was fizzy and efficient, while Tommy Tune's *My One And Only* was hollow and calculating. Both took a limited view of the possibilities of this music. It goes without saying that in the opera house they take this stuff seriously. But so do the pop guys: in the hands of Sinatra, or Peggy Lee or Lena Horne or Carly Simon or even Sineàd O'Connor, Gershwin ballads dig deep into the very core of romantic love—not period nostalgia, but for here and now and all time. Only the commercial theater still insists on restricting them to silly 1920s cutouts in meaningless plots. Operatic singers and pop stars and all the rest of us have Broadway to thank for these songs—the only true art songs in the English language. But how weird that, seventy-five years on, Broadway still hasn't figured out how to use them.

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Art

An anniversary in Montreal: "Refus global" at 50

by Karen Wilkin

Fifty years ago, on August 9, 1948, a startling document was published in Montreal. *Refus global* ("Total Rejection") was an angry, poetic declaration of aesthetic independence, an assertion of passionate belief in modernism and even more in intellectual freedom. Most of the sixteen signers were painters, but they also included a poet, a dancer, and a medical student, all now celebrated names in the annals of Canadian culture. Most were under thirty, but the author of the manifesto's most inflammatory essay, Paul-Emile Borduas, was about twenty years older, a profoundly serious and accomplished painter, trained as an academic church decorator, whose unequivocally modernist works derived from sources as diverse as Matisse and Rouault.

The signers of *Refus global* had come together informally in the early 1940s when many of them were students at the Ecole du Meuble, a school for cabinetmakers and craftsmen where young Francophone Montrealers with artistic aspirations were sent by their despairing parents to learn something practical. Borduas taught drawing and the history of art there, and was known as an open-minded supporter of young artists. He followed their progress, invited them to his Montreal home and his studio, and to his summer place.

The Borduas circle included students from the Ecole, such as Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcel Barbeau, and Jean-Paul Mousseau. Pierre Gauvreau, who was enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, was invited to join after Borduas saw an exhibition of his student work, and Gauvreau brought his brother Claude, a poet, and fellow Beaux-Arts students Magdeleine Arbour and Fernand Leduc. Other young people—writers, dancers, photographers, actors, and aficionados, including that medical student—were drawn to the group's atmosphere of intellectual stimulation and exchange. Pierre Gauvreau recalled: "We would bring our work and discuss it freely. We would talk about any topic, not solely related to the arts, and Borduas showed us his own paintings."

For the painters and poets, the most provocative material discussed was Surrealist literature. Leduc even initiated a correspondence with the high priest of Surrealism, André Breton. The French-speaking Quebecers could, of course, read the movement's manifestoes and magazines, but these publications, banned in Quebec, were hard to obtain. This aura of illicitness probably made Surrealist ideas even more attractive, and in the absence of the works of art—no Surrealist art had been exhibited in Montreal at the time—the theories were irresistible. Especially potent for Borduas and his circle was the notion, stated in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), of expressing "verbally, in writing or by any other method the real functioning of the mind." This could be achieved through "pure psychic automatism," a state "which corresponds rather closely to the state of dream-

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ing," an enormously liberating idea that offered justification for sidestepping the everyday world as a subject for painting and substituting in its place interior reality—a distinction that Borduas characterized as a shift from the objective to the subjective.

At the time, Borduas's work was evolving no less dramatically than that of the younger artists who surrounded him. Stimulated and encouraged by Surrealist ideas, he and his younger friends definitively abandoned recognizable subject matter in favor of abstract "automatic" gestures that were presumed to reveal the particulars of the individual personality. (Yes, this sounds like a description of Abstract Expressionist theory, but Borduas and his friends knew nothing about the movement in the early 1940s; it's simply a matter of common grounding.) Borduas's loose, expressionist figuration gave way to loose, gestural abstraction—"pure pyschic automatism"—and his work and that of his younger colleagues became increasingly adventurous throughout the period of their association. Soon after coming together, the Borduas circle began to hold group exhibitions of their radical new art, sometimes, of necessity, in improvised locations. Eventually, they became known as *Les Automatistes* (a coinage derived from a Borduas title by a young journalist writing for the newspaper of the Université de Montréal)—Canada's first wholly abstract artists. But, though the older painter was a potent influence on his young friends, there was never a "School of Borduas." Each artist remained a recognizable individual and the members of the group never described themselves collectively as *Les Automatistes*. Many of them disliked the name, fearing that it implied both a formal association and a fixed aesthetic.

What really united Borduas's circle was not adherence to a single approach—apart from a commitment to abstraction—but a common spirit of artistic iconoclasm and resistance to Montreal's traditional social values. The radical ideas the group discussed and the books they exchanged embraced issues far wider than the visual, something whose significance cannot be overemphasized given the repressive intellectual climate of Quebec in those years. In the late 1930s, Pierre Gauvreau had been asked to leave his Montreal high school when he was discovered to possess paperback copies of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* and Rimbaud's poems; about a decade later, an art critic newly arrived from Paris was asked to leave a bookstore and told never to return when she requested Sartre's latest book. Which brings me back to *Refus global*.

It began life as a catalogue for a group exhibition and became, instead, a manifesto cum prose poem cum exhortation, an oblique, difficult document that recalls both Surrealist and political tracts. As much a piercing cry for individual freedom and independence of expression as an avowal of aesthetic principles, *Refus global* is an existential affirmation of personal responsibility for one's actions. Militantly anticlerical, it accuses the Church of repression and perpetuating ignorance in French Canada. Yet, the arts are at the manifesto's core. It includes articles by the dancer and choreographer (later painter) Françoise Sullivan on meaning in modern dance and by Bruno Cormier, later a distinguished psychiatrist, on experiencing a work of art. Borduas provided the heated title article, which advocates breaking with "all the conventional patterns of society" and urges "refusal to exist wittingly beneath the level of our psychic and physical possibilities," as well as "refusal to be billeted in one village of plastic arts." "MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC! MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE HAZARD! MAKE WAY FOR LOVE! MAKE WAY FOR NECESSITIES!" Borduas shouts, in capital letters. "We envisage mankind, freed from his useless chains, fulfilling in the uncharted, necessary order of spontaneity, in resplendent anarchy the abundance of his individual gifts." (The slightly awkward translation was apparently approved by Borduas.)

Because it was largely written and signed by artists (most conspicuously by Borduas), *Refus global* has inevitably been associated

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with the development of adventurous painting in Montreal, but its importance—and ambition—went far beyond asserting an aesthetic, and its impact was remarkable, considering that only four-hundred copies of the unbound, mimeographed document were produced. Anyone living in the Church-dominated Quebec of the period could have predicted repercussions from Borduas's "To hell with incense burners and holy-winesippers! They extort a thousand times over anything they have ever conferred." Publishing *Refus global* in Montreal in 1948 took courage, even if most of the authors and signers were young, little-known artists and had little to lose—except for Borduas the teacher and Bruno Cormier, who risked having his medical studies interrupted. Cormier escaped censure, but *Refus global* cost Borduas his job and eventually led him to leave Montreal.

By then, the circle had begun to disperse and in the early 1950s *Les Automatistes* virtually ceased to exist as a group, although its members were increasingly recognized as individuals. *Les Automatistes* have come to be seen as crucial figures in the development of Canadian modernism, and Borduas is acclaimed as a giant. (As early as 1949, he won first prize in the Salon du Printemps of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and in 1954 represented Canada, along with Riopelle, at the São Paulo Biennial; commemorative retrospective exhibitions were organized after his death at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; the Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal; the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.)

Refus global has come to be acknowledged as a landmark in the cultural life of Quebec, even of Canada itself. (Well, not on the Prairies, but that's another matter). The once shocking document is now something for everyone to be proud of, although for obvious reasons its fiftieth anniversary was a more important occasion in French Canada than elsewhere. The Montreal newspaper *Le Devoir* celebrated with a massive section of commentary and analysis, and, most spectacular of all, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal has mounted a major Borduas exhibition, drawing on its own extensive holdings of the artist's work and archival material, some of it never before exhibited.[1]

The show traces Borduas's lonely journey from his conventional beginnings through his forging of a personal brand of expressionism to the rarefied black and white abstractions of his last years. A special section devoted to the gestural paintings of *Les Automatistes*—actually of Borduas and his circle during the years of their closest association, even before the name was coined—is a show within a show, again drawn from the museum's own rich collection of Canadian abstraction. (A highpoint is a series of photographs documenting, in the pre-video age, a snow-booted, sweater-clad Françoise Sullivan performing her famous dance in the snow.)

The show makes clear that Borduas was an enigmatic painter whose work is at once instantly recognizable, personal, and full of overtones that remind you of other artists. The same is true of the work of many of his younger associates, an oft-quoted statement by Borduas about individuality notwithstanding: "If I am certain I am in front of a Mousseau, it is because of unintentional plastic relationships that are inevitable and constant in his work, which my memory tells me are unique and particular to everything he makes." Sometimes, as in the Gorkyesque biomorphism of Borduas's earliest abstractions (and of some of the other *Automatistes*), the explanation can be found in common sources. Like the work of the Abstract Expressionists, Borduas's "subjective" paintings of the 1940s—with their floating, ambiguous forms and juicy swoops of paint, their hallucinatory, dreamlike spaces and murky, brooding color—have their origins in a fusion of Surrealist ideas about tapping the unconscious and Cubist notions

1 "Borduas and the Automatist Epic" opened at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal on May 9, 1998 and remains on view through November 29.

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of structure. By the 1950s, the calligraphic, wristy gestures of Borduas's early abstractions become more rhythmic and repetitive, the responsive brush gives way to the palette knife, and the colors cool and lighten; frayed wedges of earthtones, dull red, grey, and flickers of green float against creamy expanses of off-white paint.

Borduas's pictures from this period are among his most lyrical and ephemeral-seeming. The best are like elusive memories that slip away as you try to capture them; look away and the constellations of dragged strokes will sink into the surrounding sea of pigment. Oddly, despite their differences in scale and substance, there's something about these staccato, angular, dense paintings that recalls Jackson Pollock's shimmering, disembodied webs of coiled line. Here, however, there is a possibility of direct influence, since Borduas moved to New York in 1953, although he never managed or (according to a close friend of the period who advised him to spend time at the Cedar Bar) even tried to connect with any of the artists he admired. Despite his isolation, Borduas certainly saw Pollock's New York exhibitions and is said to have measured himself against Pollock. Yet, despite the sophistication and evident ambition of his paintings, Borduas remained, in many ways, a relatively traditional European-style modernist. He was a "late Cubist"—as Clement Greenberg astutely categorized Willem de Kooning—faithful to the easel picture and its sense of contained, if pulsating, space, rather than to the all-over expansiveness of Pollock and his colleagues.

Each of the periods of Borduas's work is well-represented in "Borduas and the Automatist Epic," but the most impressive part of the show is its assemblage of his late, generously scaled black and white abstractions, painted after he moved to Paris in 1955. (He lived there until his death at age fifty-five in 1960.) These are Borduas's best-known works: orientally spare, slablike compositions of matte black and trowelled-on white that seem to translate the implications of Pollock and Franz Kline into a new kind of dramatic materiality. They are aggressively frontal—even more so than Borduas's early, confrontational, expressionist figure paintings—with blunt-edged masses of black and white pressing toward the viewer with equal urgency, neither reconciled to being figure or ground. Like the earlier works, these late pictures also suggest connections with postwar European abstract painters, most notably Pierre Soulages and Nicolas de Staël, perhaps Hantai and Henri Michaux as well. Simple proximity may account for it, yet, again, there are other issues to be considered since, Borduas's high opinion of his own work notwithstanding, he apparently remained as diffident and as isolated in Paris as he had been in New York.

The conviction of Borduas's late pictures is striking. So is their being on view at all. Despite (or because of) their robust surfaces, these paintings are notoriously fragile. Their thick paint is flaking and cracking, their white zones yellowing, because of what is technically known, memorably, as "inherent vice"—built-in material and structural problems. The spectacular number of Borduas's late pictures on exhibit at the Musée d'art contemporain and the freshness of their appearance are tributes to the skill of Canadian conservators.

The Borduas show is a thought-provoking, welcome opportunity to see a significant twentieth-century painter whole, and in the company of his closest colleagues. If it raises more questions than it answers about influence and cross-fertilization, it may be because many of them are unanswerable. But Borduas's importance goes beyond his own achievement. His legacy, in a sense, is an entire tradition of Montreal abstraction, both responding to his example and rejecting it. His daring introspective paintings and those of his colleagues were the first to establish a nonfigurative alternative to the sentimental celebration of the Northern landscape that constituted establishment Canadian painting of the period. (This self-congratulatory

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landscape tradition died even harder in English Canada where abstraction didn't establish a toehold until about 1953.) But for the generation of Montreal artists immediately following *Les Automatistes*, the notion that painting could refer to nothing but itself and its maker was a foregone conclusion. Their conflict was between two kinds of abstraction: the "subjective," emotion-driven, gestural approach of Borduas and *Les Automatistes* versus the dispassionate, detached, theoretical geometry of the younger artists loosely known as *Les Plasticiens*. These polarities seem less urgent for Montreal artists working today, who, like their colleagues everywhere, respond less to local traditions than to infinite possibilities. But whether they embrace it or reject it, they are still affected by having inherited a long history of modernist abstract painting.

That Montreal abstract painting remains vital and various was affirmed this summer by "*Peinture Peinture*," an extraordinarily ambitious multi-generational, multi-gallery, multi-location (even multi-city) exhibition of recent abstract painting organized to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Refus global*.[2] The purpose of the exhibition was to demonstrate that, rumors to the contrary, abstract painting—at least in Quebec—is as lively, relevant, and up to date as it was in the days of *Les Automatistes* and *Les Plasticiens*. The brainchild of the indefatigable Montreal dealer René Blouin, and selected in consultation with the art historian and curator Gaston St.-Pierre, "*Peinture Peinture*" occupied some twenty temporary exhibition spaces in the Belgo Building, a reclaimed St.-Catherine's Street loft building. Related and complementary shows of current and historical art were mounted elsewhere in member galleries of the Association des galeries d'art contemporain in Montreal, in Quebec City and Ottawa, and in museums, exhibition centers, and alternative spaces throughout Quebec. Even the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa exhibited its collection of Montreal abstract painting of the 1940s and 1950s. "*Peinture Peinture*" (or at least the portion of it that I saw) was a little shapeless, uneven, fascinating, and exhilarating.

The size of the exhibition at the Belgo Building was staggering—about seventy-five artists, each represented by two or more works. It ranged from "living treasures" of the history of recent Canadian art, such as the signers of *Refus global* Marcelle Ferron, Fernand Leduc, and Françoise Sullivan, to the doyens of Montreal's theoretical hard-edge abstract movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Yves Gaucher, Guido Molinari, and Claude Tousignant, to youngsters newly declaring themselves. There were sturdy individualists who have been major presences in Montreal art for decades, such as Charles Gagnon, Jean McEwen, and John Heward, and tough, serious painters who have emerged more recently, such as Michèle Drouin, Richard Mill, and Leopold Plotek.

Any show of this kind, however thoughtfully selected, is bound to be inconsistent, but what was impressive about "*Peinture Peinture*" was its general absence of homage to trend. Good, adequate, or downright dull, the great majority of the painters at the Belgo Building seemed refreshingly independent-minded; only a few could be described as imitations of the current stars of the international-art-magazine pantheon. (For those who keep track of these things, Ross Bleckner's influence seemed particularly pervasive.) And it should be noted that the organizers, intelligently, defined both "abstract" and "painting" broadly, which meant that "*Peinture Peinture*" included works with figurative references and a number of installations that tended toward sculpture.

I admit that I focused hardest on the work of the artists I have been following for some years. There were some disappointments but more often ample rewards. Gaucher's austere demonstration of what

2 "*Peinture Peinture*" was seen at the Belgo Building, Montreal, and at other venues throughout Quebec, from June 6 until July 11, 1998.

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deep blue has to say to green on its way to becoming black was both severe and seductive. McEwen and Gagnon's pictures were accomplished, lyrical improvisations on the possibilities of nuanced touch—with, for Gagnon, an ironic return to brute actuality superimposed. Heward's unstretched, free-floating panels pitted the Eastern associations of overscaled Zen-inspired calligraphy against the wholly Western connotations of drapery that conjured up classical Greece. Both Mill and Drouin explored, in very different ways, an expressive tension between firm, almost neutral, architectural structures and intimate, inflected gestures. Plotek's stubborn, fierce paintings were perversely old masterish and wholly about twentieth-century issues, unsettling the viewer by shifting between a hint of reference and the fact of paint on canvas. Among the more memorable works by younger painters were Stéphane Gilot's watery green installation, an angular environment that put the spectator inside the picture; Juan Schneider's energetic, murky canvas with its sketchy bird and house imagery; and Marc Garneau's muscular compositions with their insistence on repetitious, rhythmic marks.

What was particularly Québecois about the work in "*Peinture Peinture*"? Variety dominated, but that is a hallmark of the times, not a regional characteristic. Yet, without discounting the obvious multiplicity of approaches represented, it was still possible to discern the two dominant threads of Montreal abstraction that trace their origins to the old opposition of the gestural, expressive manipulation of materials of *Les Automatistes* and the cerebral, dispassionate working out of optical permutations of *Les Plasticiens*. Both strains of abstraction seem to persist in Montreal. (Sometimes they seem to have fused, as in Milly Ristvedt's overscaled grids of luminous, loosely brushed color.) Nonetheless, the first generation of theoretical geometricians seemed to pursue their "researches" with more conviction than their descendants, and the older generation's nervy revelation of profound feelings is sometimes diluted with irony or transformed into pure self-absorption by younger practitioners. But as the organizers of "*Peinture Peinture*" point out, the old polarities are irrelevant. Artists today feel free to use in their work seemingly contradictory aspects of both past and present art, artifacts of cultures not their own, and even (or especially) images from mass media. All of this, not surprisingly, made itself felt, with varying degrees of success, in the work exhibited in "*Peinture Peinture*." Borduas, I suspect, with his curiosity about the new, his interest in young artists, and his dislike of the predictable, would have loved the show, warts and all. Certainly he would have been delighted by the vigor and diversity of Quebec painting today. What was that line in *Refus global* about mankind's "fulfilling . . . in resplendent anarchy the abundance of his individual gifts"?

Exhibition notes

"Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. June 19–September 7, 1998

The objects now classified as "art" have become so varied as to befuddle the most dedicated observer of the contemporary scene. The jumble that is today's art world has reduced even the most established of mediums to just another means of attracting attention. Such is the case with painting. Notwithstanding the crowds lining up for the latest blockbuster, rarely has the application of paint on canvas seemed such a marginal endeavor.

There have been few more dispiriting examples of the current lack of regard for painting than what was to be seen this summer at the Guggenheim Museum. In the museum's main event, "The Art of the Motorcycle," the chrome-plated cacophony that Frank Gehry made of Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda could not have been further from the subdued character of

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"Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light," which ran concurrently in the back galleries. Indeed, the paintings scarcely inhabited the same cosmos as Gehry's popular sensationalism. This isn't to deny the complexity of contemporary culture in all its permutations or the satisfactions to be found in good design. But shunted as it was to the tower of the Guggenheim, "Vilhelm Hammershøi" pointed to the second-rate status museums give to painting, now seen as the purview of specialists alone.

One might argue, of course, that Hammershøi's work *is* inherently of interest only to the specialist. He was, after all, a nineteenth-century Danish artist working at a time when painting—specifically, French painting—was going through revolutionary transformations. Given this extraordinary context, even the most talented of artists operating outside of Paris can seem a minor subject for art historians. Minor, perhaps, but not necessarily negligible. The curator Robert Rosenblum writes in the catalogue that Hammershøi's "uncommon intensity" compels us "to locate him within a loftier United Nations of artists." One can forgive such a clumsy conceit if only because it praises this deserving artist. If Hammershøi's paintings lie firmly inside the orthodoxy of nineteenth-century art, nonetheless they do broaden our sense of its boundaries.

Hammershøi could best be described as a master of reticence. His finest paintings are of interiors, usually but not always populated by a lone female figure. Hammershøi's palette—made up almost exclusively of variations of gray—and deliberate brushwork are those of a painter deeply interested in the nuances of light and touch. Characterized by a filtered, silvery tonality, the paintings are anchored by an emphatic geometry. Hammershøi was a deft hand at creating off-center compositions, and the manner in which, say, pieces of furniture enter the painting's space makes for an understated—and sometimes abrupt—tension. His reverence for seventeenth-century Dutch painting, particularly that of Vermeer, is clear. Hammershøi transformed the enigmatic domesticity of the Dutch master into a desolate lyricism that stops short of being spooky. Imbued with disquiet, Hammershøi's paintings are, in their detachment, recognizably modern.

Yet only a handful of canvases have the heft of major art. Hammershøi was an undeniably gifted artist, but his work is less magical than willful. Despite the expert handling of grays, one begins to hanker for more chromatic life in his paintings, and the work's aesthetic terrain, while felt, is narrow. Hammershøi was an artist so intent on looking over his shoulder that he failed to make the leap we expect from great artists. It is one thing to be inspired by the museum; it is another to be constrained by it. That Hammershøi was capable of capturing even an iota of Vermeer's quietude, however, tells us that he is worthy of consideration. "Vilhelm Hammershøi" was not the art-historical earthquake its organizers might have hoped for, but even slight shifts in the fault line have their rewards for partisans of painting.

—*Mario Naves*

"Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968"
at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
July 9–September 22, 1998

On more than one occasion, I have had the opportunity to liken an art exhibition to an amusement park funhouse. A lot of contemporary art—installation art, in particular—lends itself to such an unflattering analogy. However one configures it, installations eschew the nuances of high art for the spectacle of theater or, should one say, the theatrical. One leading practitioner of the form stated that his aim was to "control" the viewer, and the most telling attribute of installation art is its distrust of aesthetic engagement. In taking over "the white cube" of the gallery, installations overwhelm and, at times, harass the viewer. Given the desperation inherent in such en-

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deavors, who wouldn't prefer the attractions of a roadside carny?

The re-creation of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room* (1965), as seen in the exhibition "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968," was like a funhouse but in a good way—diverting and silly. Inside a gallery lined with mirrors, the viewer confronted innumerable polka-dotted phalluses made of stuffed fabric; they were, almost literally, the "prizes" found in a carnival midway (albeit a peculiar one). Gallerygoers were allowed inside *Infinity Room* one at a time, and greeted it—and incoming visitors—with a smile that was equal parts mirth and embarrassment. The comedy of Kusama's refracted priapism is not unrelated to the more outré tendencies of the 1960s and has a woozy charm. Could this mean that the doodads of a flower child are preferable to the jaded ironies of our current crop of art-world careerists? Perhaps, although it may be a distinction so fine as to be not worthy of scrutiny.

"Love Forever" was not a retrospective; rather, it covered a decade wherein Kusama, newly arrived from Japan, made her presence felt in the New York art world. During this time, Kusama explored in rapid succession a variety of media: painting, sculpture, collage, installation, performance, and video. Her art is characterized by compulsiveness, repetition, and, in an odd way, innocence. Toward the end of the show, for instance, there was an enlarged reproduction of a New York *Daily News* cover with a photograph of Kusama's staged "nude-in" at MOMA's sculpture garden in 1969. Having one's confreres skinny-dip in a fountain alongside a sculpture by Aristide Maillol is not just a publicity stunt but, in retrospect, kind of sweet. Likewise, when we read that Kusama's art was inspired by her "fear of male genitalia," we wonder why her lumpish fetishes, which are more absurd than appalling, are bereft of angst. In a culture where self-mutilation is considered a viable form of artistic expression, one almost pines for tame shenanigans such as these.

Are the virtues of Kusama's art, such as they are, intrinsic to her vision or a form of nostalgia on the part of the viewer? By the time one reached the end of "Love Forever," one knew the answer. Certainly the requisite video gallery, with its soundtrack of shapeless rock music, was less an evocation of the Sixties than an unintentional parody of it. Kusama's work is too lightweight to be taken seriously, but "Love Forever" was disheartening nonetheless. The curators at MOMA touted her as a precursor to "the art of our time," and, alas, they were not off base. Kusama's obsessions and narcissism may, for some, be tokens of creative authenticity, but her art leads nowhere. Surely there are better role models for artists as we enter the twenty-first century.

—Mario Naves

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The media

Humpty Dumpty: together again

by James Bowman

Within twenty-four hours of the release of Kenneth Starr's report claiming that President Clinton had been guilty of impeachable offenses in attempting to cover up his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, it was obvious from the elite press's treatment of the affair that, barring new developments, Clinton was going to beat the rap once again. It hadn't been obvious up until that point. Between August 17, when the President gave what was universally criticized as an insufficiently penitent confession of wrongdoing on national television, and September 11, the day of the report's release, the consensus of the media and others in the Beltway elites was extremely ominous for the President's prospects for a continued tenure in office. Not only Michael Kelly, one of his most trenchant critics, was writing of "the end of The Clinton Show," but even the bright and cynical Maureen Dowd, the last person you would expect to take an apocalyptic view of the situation, wrote in *The New York Times* of September 9 that

> For the first time, all of Bill Clinton's great escapes and semantic dodges and political stratagems were failing him. He was trapped, checkmated, spiraling. Even his political rivals seemed shaken to see Mr. Clinton lose his famous resilience. . . . It is very sad and very strange to watch Mr. Clinton give speeches. His words twang with unintended ironies and double-entendres. You wonder how he can get through a day without shattering from the pressure of watching his Presidency melt . . . . Mr. Clinton seemed like a character from a Russian novel, snared by his own conscience.

In the Senate, it was perhaps not surprising to hear criticism from Democrats like Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Bob Kerrey but such Clintonite stalwarts as Joseph Lieberman, Ernest Hollings and Barbara Boxer—Barbara Boxer!—were now denouncing the President. "More Democrats Rebuke Clinton and Call for Public Report," said *The Times* the same day. The vultures seemed to be circling.

But two days later, at a White House prayer breakfast for clergymen on the day that he knew the report was to be made public, Clinton finally gave the kind of effusive, emotional apology that the media had been asking for:

> I agree with those who have said that, in my first statement after I testified, I was not contrite enough.
>
> I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine: first and most important, my family, also my friends, my staff, my Cabinet [pause], Monica Lewinsky and her family, and the American people.
>
> I have asked all for their forgiveness. But I believe that to be forgiven more than sorrow is required. At least two more things: first,

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> genuine repentance, a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making. I have repented.
>
> Second, what my Bible calls a broken spirit. An understanding that I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be. A willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek.
>
> A renunciation of the pride and the anger, which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain.

Then, with broken spirit, he asked,

> Now, what does all this mean for me and for us?
>
> First, I will instruct my lawyers to mount a vigorous defense using all available, appropriate arguments. But legal language must not obscure the fact that I have done wrong.

This was apparently all that was needed. Like the clergymen who, the papers told us, were all in tears at the President's words, the media's forgiveness seemed to be instant and total. It didn't matter that the apology was as patently insincere as that of August 17. (Certainly with a semantic cheese-parer like Clinton it would be unwise to assume that his saying "it is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine" is the same thing as his saying that it *is* genuine). His real feelings were revealed the day before when Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, spoke up in a cabinet meeting ostensibly called so the members could receive Clinton's personal apology. According to a report in *The Washington Post*,

> "She said something like 'I don't care about the lying, but I'm appalled at the behavior.' And frankly, he [Clinton] whacked her, let her have it," this source said. The president told Shalala that if her logic had prevailed in 1960, Richard M. Nixon would have been elected president instead of John F. Kennedy, the source said. After that, no other Cabinet member had anything critical to say, the participant added. Shalala declined to give any interviews after the session.

The juxtaposition between these words and the crocodile tears at the prayer breakfast remained largely unnoticed by the media.

Even more tellingly, the same morning on which Clinton was saying that "Legal language must not obscure the fact that I have done wrong," his lawyers, David Kendall and Charles Ruff, launched the "vigorous defense" he spoke of by saying that "If answers are . . . literally truthful but misleading, there is no perjury, as a matter of law, no matter how misleading the testimony is or is intended to be." What they were talking about here was precisely the obscuring legal language Clinton had just promised to eschew, which amounted to an insistence on maintaining the fiction—the lie, in fact—that Clinton had not lied in his answers to the lawyers for Paula Jones and the grand jury.

For if anything was made clear by Starr's report it was that Clinton had lied egregiously when he denied having sex with Lewinsky and was continuing to lie by saying that he hadn't lied. But the press was willing to give him the benefit of a doubt approximately as large as the doubt—about one chance in eight trillion—that it was not his DNA on the semen-stained dress. The next day—the same day that his paper arrived with a twenty-six page "Special Report" containing the text of Starr's report—John F. Harris of *The Washington Post* wrote that "that sharp contrast—between Clinton's abject apology and Kendall's lawyerly legerdemain—highlighted the dual tracks the White House was following on perhaps the most remarkable day of the Clinton presidency." The dual tracks? Doubtless Harris or his editors, mindful of their journalistic "professionalism," thought that it would have betrayed an impermissible anti-Clinton bias if he had called it what it was, which was mere duplicity. But his posture of treating such blatant and compounded falsehood as a morally neutral strategy for political recovery was the harbinger of what the rest of the media was to bring in the days ahead.

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Harris at least allowed himself the naughty luxury of mentioning that "some in the White House" had been calling Clinton's performance at the prayer breakfast that morning a "full Swaggart." The day's prize for journalistic subservience to White House spin went instead to Linda Greenhouse of *The New York Times* who claimed that the report was "an aggressive piece of legal advocacy."

> Few of the factual assertions are left to speak for themselves. "The President's linguistic parsing is unreasonable," the report says of Mr. Clinton's struggle to avoid acknowledging the sexual nature of the relationship. At many other points, the report characterizes the President's testimony as deceptive, "not plausible," or defying "common sense."

Notice that she puts "common sense" in quotation marks in order to suggest that, in some way unspecified, Clinton's clinging to the position that Miss Lewinsky had sex with him but he did not have sex with her does not defy common sense. If such "linguistic parsing" is not unreasonable, then nothing is unreasonable, and yet saying so seemed to Ms. Greenhouse "aggressive . . . legal advocacy." She went on:

> In short, this is a document with attitude. It serves up a worst-case scenario: conversations that some might find inconclusive, ambiguous, or at worst suggestive, like the exchanges between the President and Betty Currie, his secretary, in the period surrounding Mr. Clinton's deposition in the Paula Corbin Jones sexual misconduct civil lawsuit, are characterized as a criminal obstruction of justice.

"Some" indeed might find such conversations inconclusive or ambiguous, but very few outside the employ of the White House or the media. "This report," she says,

> is notable for its failure to acknowledge that there might be more than one way to view at least some of the evidence. For example, Mr. Starr concludes that the President "orchestrated" the concealment of gifts he had given Ms. Lewinsky, a question on which the evidence is certainly suggestive but not conclusive. In trying to make the case that this episode amounted to an obstruction of justice, the report simply dismisses contrary interpretations with the statement that "those inferences fall outside the range of reasonable possibility."

Just imagine that! You or I or a jury—or a moderately intelligent ten-year old—might think that they fall outside the range of reasonable possibility, but Ms. Greenhouse and *The New York Times* are keeping their options open and damning Starr for not doing likewise.

True, it is not quite fair to *The New York Times* to judge it by Ms. Greenhouse. Editorially, as it has done before, the paper took a much tougher line:

> Until it was measured by Kenneth Starr, no citizen—indeed, perhaps no member of his own family—could have grasped the completeness of President Clinton's mendacity or the magnitude of his recklessness. . . . A President who had hoped to be remembered for the grandeur of his social legislation will instead be remembered for the tawdriness of his tastes and conduct and for the disrespect with which he treated a dwelling that is a revered symbol of Presidential dignity.

But, although *The Times* dismissed the President's counterattack by noting that "Mr. Kendall . . . insults the nation's intelligence by insisting that the President did not lie when he denied having sex with Monica Lewinsky" and the paper claimed that "by relying on this kind of destructive legal counsel . . . Mr. Clinton has managed to create one of the most disastrous personal situations in the history of the Presidency," it was Ms. Greenhouse who turned out to be a better weathervane for the way that the media winds were beginning to blow. By Sunday, it was apparent that Clinton had won the battle for the

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media. On the talk shows in interviews with Ruff and Kendall, both Tim Russert and George Will, though obviously disagreeing with their subjects' transparent disingenuousness, gave the President's lawyers a respectful hearing instead of laughing in their faces when they continued to insist that the President had not committed perjury. As Michael Kinsley wrote in *Time*, "journalists' shameful secret is that we love being spun. The networks vie for the privilege of having the next round of lies uttered on their particular Sunday talk show. It's called 'advancing the story.'"

So too, in the Sunday *Washington Post*, Dan Balz called Kendall's and Ruff's pathetic attempts to prevaricate about the President's perjury "a scathing rebuttal." Ruth Marcus wrote that "A number of outside legal experts agreed with the Clinton team that the case mounted against the president by independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr would face major weaknesses as a criminal prosecution." On the inside pages of the special scandal section of the paper, the reporters fanned out across the country to gauge the public's reactions reported back that "For Poor Community, Scandal is World Away" (Jon Jeter in Chicago) or "On a Sunny Day, Outdoor Activities Outrank Indoor Dalliances" (Tom Kenworthy in Colorado). These were counterindications that more than canceled out editorial calls in some papers, including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Denver Post*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, and *USA Today*, that Clinton should resign.

Of course there were still a few left-leaning pundits and editorialists willing to exceed even the President's men in the extravagance of their attack on Starr. On *The Post*'s op-ed page the same day, for example, Richard Cohen wrote, with unintended comedy, of his anxiety about "the immense, virtually unchecked, power" of the fiend Starr and the "medieval quality" to his persecution of the president. This "Orwellian intrusion by the gumshoes of the state," he claimed, amounted to "a public evisceration" of the defenseless President. Likewise, Michael Grunwald in Monday's *Post* quoted Lauren Weinstein, moderator of the Privacy Forum on the Internet, as saying that "You have to think that if this can happen to the most powerful man on the planet, then nobody's private life is private anymore. . . . Everything's fair game now."

But it was on the news pages of the papers that the real damage was being done to Starr's case. In the Sunday *New York Times*, Francis X. Clines called the Kendall/Ruff rebuttal "a blistering counterattack" to Starr's report and reprinted without comment their characterization of it as a "hit-and-run smear campaign," full of gratuitous "pornographic specificity." Meanwhile, Michael Winerip was reporting that Starr is "a deeply religious man, whose father, a fundamentalist minister, used to deliver sermons back home in Texas on the perils of women dressed in Bermuda shorts." Enough said! The whole thing boils down to a religious fanatic and his overzealous pursuit of what his quaint religion regards as "sin" in public men. "There is a thin line between precision and voyeurism," writes Winerip knowingly.

Most tellingly, on an inside page James Bennet and Don Van Natta Jr. reported on the President's survival strategy in such a neutral way that it was in itself a confirmation of that strategy's success:

> President Clinton's closest advisers waited nervously today to see whether the most audacious political gamble of his career—declaring last month that he told the truth when he swore he did not have a sexual relationship with Monica S. Lewinsky—would cause the public to turn on his inquisitors rather than on him. . . .
>
> "We had a sense that Starr might feel compelled to put all this sex stuff in, to try to prove that the President lied," one associate of Mr. Clinton's said. "There was talk that if he did that, we could say there was nothing to the serious charges and all this amounts to is a sex report." . . .

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> Mr. Starr . . . dismissed criticism leveled by Mr. Clinton himself, that his prosecutors had tried to "criminalize my private life." . . .
>
> But on the first page of their rebuttal, Mr. Clinton's lawyers mocked Mr. Starr's "pious defense" of his "pornographic specificity." . . . They reserved their harshest comments for Mr. Starr's descriptions of intimate sexual details, which underpinned his claims that the President lied to the grand jury and perjured himself in the Jones deposition.
>
> "We knew he'd do this," one adviser to Mr. Clinton said. "He couldn't help himself."

And so the blatantly mendacious strategy of the Clinton team—first to deny what was obvious to the meanest intelligence, that the President had committed perjury, and then, when Starr used the sexual details he had gathered to demonstrate the falsity of this denial, to accuse him of pious pornography—was put on an equal footing with Starr's straightforward demonstration of what, in any other circumstances, would have been the obvious. Even Barney Frank was heard to grumble that Clinton "lies by being technically accurate. I wish he would stop it. . . . He's not fourteen anymore trying to outsmart the principal."

Part of the success of this strategy with the gullible media, riddled as it always is with anxieties about its reputation for "professionalism" and objectivity, was owing to frequent hints of Starr's religiosity. The independent counsel's famous hymn singing was in itself enough to discredit him with most of the media and did its part to produce stories like the one by David E. Rosenbaum elsewhere in that day's *Times*, "Comparing Two Very Different Versions of Clinton's Conduct"—as if the Starr/Clinton quarrel were merely a difference of opinion. Likewise, in the "Week in Review" section, Peter Applebome characterized it as "the blood feud between Bill Clinton and Kenneth W. Starr . . . a duel between Southerners, each representing competing instincts of the South."

But the final victory of the Clinton forces was owed to the media's own pieties, which are all aesthetic ones. Starr's hymn-singing unattractiveness might not in itself have been enough to sink him, but his factual, even clinical, reporting of Bill Clinton's sexual behavior inevitably smacked to them of prurience, voyeurism, and pornography. Such tackiness, as they saw it, trumped Clinton's own, and even Maureen Dowd, who only four days before had seen the President as being on his last legs, fell in behind the White House spinners:

> Kenneth Starr, all these years and all these millions later, has not delivered impeachable offenses. He has delivered a 445-page Harold Robbins novel. If we are going to dump our President, it should be for something big and bold and black and original. Not for the most tired story ever told. . . . The dialogue in this potboiler, compiled with sanctimonious, even voyeuristic, relish by Reverend Starr, is so trite and bodice-ripping that it makes "Titanic" look profound.

Of course, she had to acknowledge that what made the report look merely tacky was that it described the "cheesy and depressing" couplings of Clinton. But, clinging firmly, and with less irony than she must have allowed herself to think, to the aesthetic view of the matter, she found no obstacle to laying at Starr's door the responsibility for the fact that "the sex scenes are flat, repetitive, juvenile, and cloying."

Although she may have been trying to be funny, her shift in focus from the President's behavior to criticism of Starr's report was precisely what the report by Messrs. Bennet and Van Natta revealed the White House was hoping for. By Monday morning, all the media was resounding with the distinctive notes of primitive literary criticism. The adjectives "lurid," "graphic," "steamy," "seamy," "explicit," "stunningly detailed"—even the White House's chosen words "salacious," "sordid," and "pornographic"—modified many if not most nominal occurrences of "the report" or "Starr's report" and

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were echoed in various "vox populi" pieces. One woman interviewed by Elisabeth Bumiller in *The New York Times* even picked up Maureen Dowd's "Harold Robbins novel." Or did Miss Dowd get it from her? And, of course, there were plenty of Clinton partisans interjecting "overblown," "witch-hunt," and "moving on."

The superficial sophistication of analysing Starr's "text" rather than the behavior it revealed was also attractive to the journalistic mind. David Maraniss, Clinton's biographer, argued that the "close parsing" and semantic trickery in the President's denials of the affair with Gennifer Flowers, his evasion of the draft, and his smoking of marijuana may have seemed

> preposterous, if nonetheless somewhat effective, at the time. Now they are completely accepted as a central aspect of Clinton's defense. In their rebuttal to the Starr report, Clinton's lawyers perfectly capture his semantic legerdemain by making the argument that it is within any defendant's rights to state things that are true but misleading. "Answers to questions that are literally true are not perjury," they argue. . . . It is also within his rights, they said, to give "narrow answers to ambiguous questions."

The trouble is that the answers Clinton gave were not literally true, any more than the questions were ambiguous in ordinary usage. What Maraniss seems to be arguing here is not only that Clinton has the right to be legalistic with the truth, but also that he has the right to use an idiosyncratic definition of even the most common words. "What do you mean by 'sex'?" or "It depends on what you mean by being 'alone.'" Like Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, he reserves the right to make a word mean "just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." This kind of thinking is congenial to the journalistic mentality, not only for taking up a middle position between two opposed points of view but also for providing an excuse for some striking sophistry. "An utterly ironic argument can be made," writes Maraniss,

> according to some legal scholars, that Clinton's long-standing pattern of semantic maneuvering has had the effect of making his claims against perjury more credible. Perjury requires that a person knowingly and wilfully set out to deceive. Perhaps Clinton has become so habitual in his methods that they are no longer an act of deception.

Q.E.D.

In other columns, the serious political reporters and pundits continued to write of impeachment and resignation as if they were serious possibilities, but the language of their coverage was already revealing that they were not. The media, it was true, still had no great love for Clinton. He had committed the sin of lying to *them* and, even more unforgivably, of uncharacteristically claiming the privileges of reticence and presidential privacy after having encouraged them throughout his presidency to think of such fuddy-duddy notions as relics of the pre-1960s past. But, much as they disliked him, they disliked Kenneth Starr more, and that is what told in the end. The Republicans and even a few Democrats in Congress can continue to hem and haw about impeachable offenses, but without either a popular majority for impeachment or a willingness in the press to indulge its sense of high drama in such a cause, there seems little chance of its happening.

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Books

A bundle of paradoxes

by Daniel J. Silver

Boswell records that Samuel Johnson had read Daniel Defoe and "allowed a considerable share of merit to a man, who, bred a tradesman, had written so variously and so well." The comment points to a truth about Defoe: a Protestant through and through, he had an amazingly catholic mind. It is, indeed, hard to think of another writer of imaginative literature who, in his journalism and pamphleteering, took on such an extraordinary range of subjects: finance, trade, religion, politics, travel, medicine, science, architecture, farming, horticulture, morals, and manners, among others.

The British journalist Richard West aims to pay tribute to this range of interests in his entertaining and refreshing biography, *Daniel Defoe: The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures*.[1] For West, Defoe's story became compelling not because of a lingering childhood attachment to *Robinson Crusoe*, which he confesses to having first read at an advanced age—as was Defoe when he wrote it. Rather, as an enthusiastic traveler and an adept of travel writing, West was inspired and delighted by Defoe's *Tour of the Whole Island of Great Britain*. Researching the present book, West also discovered that all of Defoe's weekly journalism from the broadsheet *Review*, which he founded, has been preserved in facsimile. What West found there was a breadth of absorbing prose that makes the case for acclaiming Defoe a great journalist, writing cleverly, informatively, and passionately about every subject of the day and anticipating every device—some, to be sure, not altogether welcome—of modern Fleet Street. It was through his topical writings and notorious satirical pamphlets that Defoe was known in his own time, and West justifiably wants to bring us to a fresh acquaintance with this aspect of Defoe, which has since faded into the background.

Defoe has found two kinds of fame through the ages. The first is literary: by the end of the eighteenth century, he would be principally known as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, and so his status rests today. Modern critics, beginning with Ian Watt's canonization in *The Rise of the Novel*, have embellished the picture and dubbed Defoe the "father of the novel"—though, as West correctly observes, none of Defoe's fictions really qualifies as a novel proper. The second sort of fame is political and stems from the role accorded Defoe in Whig history. Beginning with Macaulay and ending with G. M. Trevelyan in the 1930s, the Whig historians found a hero in Defoe because of his efforts to help put William of Orange on the English throne, in the events that became known as the Glorious Revolution, which in Whig ideology guaranteed English liberties. As the Whig apologia has faded, so has Defoe's role. Yet, whatever the his-

1 *Daniel Defoe: The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures*, by Richard West; Carroll & Graf, 427 pages, $26.

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toricist excesses of the Whig view, West supports the claim that Defoe was a significant actor in the higher politics of his day and deserves an honored place in British history.

But West also shows that Defoe was simply a wonderfully spirited and quirky character, a bundle of paradoxes. Raised a Dissenter from the Anglican Church, and thus by definition an outsider to the mainstream in politics and religion, Defoe would become a trusted advisor and spy for a Tory grandee at the center of power. Known for his plainstyle prose and forthright, unblinking manner, Defoe was also a connoisseur of deceit and disguise—sometimes from sheer necessity, but one feels at times out of perverse enjoyment. Sober and practical in worldly affairs, Defoe would become a chronic debtor; he dispensed excellent advice on financial matters, but as an inveterate gambler in investment schemes, he could not take his own counsel and lost several small fortunes. An unquestioning Puritan in matters of sexual morality, in *Moll Flanders* he would write one of the bawdiest books of his time.

Little is known of Defoe's childhood. He was born, it appears, in 1660, the year of the Stuart Restoration, though his birth, unlike his siblings', is not recorded in the parish register. He was raised in London, and it was in London or its environs that he would spend most of his life, as the great city would always be for Defoe the center of his idea of Britain—modern, bustling, industrious, and indelibly Protestant. His father was a tallow chandler named John Foe. Though there has been speculation that the name was Anglicized from the Dutch, West notes that the best modern authority has not been able to trace the family line outside of England. Defoe lived through the two terrible cataclysms of the period, the plague of 1665 and the great London fire of 1666—the Foe house being one of only three left standing in its district after the latter event, as if a sign of divine election. Barred from the Anglican schools, young Defoe attended Dissenting academies, and may have thought of becoming a Nonconformist minister. But by 1682, he had followed his father's path, entering the City of London as a hosiery merchant.

The City was a stronghold of Dissent as Nonconformist sentiments held sway through much of the merchant class. None of which escaped the notice of the crypto-Catholic Charles II, who introduced various depredations against both Dissenters as a group and against the freemen of the City in particular. Dissenters had much to fear from the prospect that Charles's brother, the openly Catholic James, Duke of York, would assume the throne. For this reason, they pushed to get the House of Commons to deprive James of his royal rights, on the grounds that a Catholic could not head the Church of England. Some, Defoe among them, went even further, supporting the claim to the throne of Charles's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth. When Charles died in 1685 and James took the crown, Monmouth staged a rebellion. The circumstantial evidence suggests that Defoe fought with him at the decisive Battle of Sedgemoor, where Monmouth was defeated and captured during flight. The upshot was to strengthen James's hand and led to bloody reprisals. Luckily, Defoe—perhaps merely because he had his own horse or was good at disguise—managed to escape.

Defoe, like many others who wanted a strong Protestant king, turned to the Dutch leader, the staunchly Calvinist William of Orange. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 was generally welcomed by beleaguered Britons, but the dour William, foreign in every way, could not long hold the people's loyalty; he was subject to sniping at court and vulgar disdain among the rabble. In this atmosphere, Defoe would forever endear himself to William's followers and amuse many others through his bitingly witty pamphlet *The True-Born Englishman*, which ridiculed the chauvinism of William's detractors, pointing out that Britain was a multiethnic country where few could lay claim to ancient Saxon lineage. The pam-

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phlet went through many printings and undermined High Tory legitimists who looked longingly for another Stuart to save England from the gloomy, uncouth Dutchman.

An indifferent tradesman and, happily, but a sometime soldier, Defoe had come to his true métier. By the beginning of Queen Anne's reign, Defoe had fully taken up the pen, having founded a thrice-weekly newspaper called the *Review*—beating to the punch the now better known *Tatler* and *Spectator* of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. In the *Review*, Defoe wrote about current events, editorialized about politics, dispensed advice, and published letters from readers—some of which he composed himself, the better to set up straw men to destroy with acid replies.

Defoe's bitter gibes and independence of mind were not always appreciated and, indeed, landed him in the stocks. After writing one pamphlet attacking Dissenters of weak conscience who indulged in "occasional conformity"—taking Anglican communion so as to avoid the disabilities imposed by the hated Test Act passed under Charles II—Defoe was mortified to see the High Churchmen use his points to illustrate their contempt for the Nonconformist "vipers." Having insulted Whig Dissenters, he would make up for it in spades with another pamphlet aimed at "high-flying" Tories who tried to push through an Occasional Conformity Bill to smoke out dissembling Nonconformists. As West observes, Defoe's *Shortest Way with Dissenters* can be best compared with Swift's *Modest Proposal* for its savage irony—except that unfortunately for Defoe the irony was all too effective. This pamphlet so accurately lampooned High Church invective that it was taken to be the real thing: Tories actually recommending Dissenters be hanged! Outraged Tories called for blood; the anonymous pamphleteer was hunted down, captured, tried, and convicted of "sedition." He was forced to stand in the pillory, but was said to be pelted mainly by flowers from appreciative Londoners. He still faced an indefinite sentence in the ghastly Newgate prison, a living hell, but was rescued by intercession of the Queen's ministers, who thought the clever Defoe could be of some use.

Defoe's backstairs champion proved to be one of the most formidable politicians of the day, Robert Harley (later Lord Oxford). Though parliament would have to wait for the advent of Robert Walpole to see its first prime minister proper, Harley paved the way as a true party leader, as well as the very type of the Machiavellian manipulator—"Robin the Trickster" they called him—possessed of as few principles as scruples. Harley was himself born of merchant stock and raised a Dissenter; of generally Whiggish disposition, he found it convenient nonetheless to gravitate to the Tories when they were on the rise. But Harley was a moderate Tory opposed to the High Church types who taunted Dissenters, favored the Stuart Pretender, and tried to thwart William's and then Anne's continental wars against Louis XIV.

Harley found in Defoe not only an able and willing polemicist in the cause of Protestant battle against the Bourbons and Hapsburgs—hostilities rather ingloriously backed by City merchants who longed to smash Spanish dominion over the lucrative Atlantic slave trade—but also an adventurer who was willing to go underground as a sort of informant or spy. Defoe would serve Harley for a number of years in this capacity, providing in particular some valuable intelligence about the political situation in Scotland, which was a wild card in English politics.

Our knowledge of these secret activities is limited, yet it seems fair to say that Defoe served his patron best through his open writings, which pushed the programs of the Queen's "Junto," consisting of, in addition to Harley, Lord Godolphin, the financial wizard, and John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, the greatest soldier of the age. Defoe scribbled tirelessly in defense of the noble aims of the continental wars and the virtues of debt financing that propped up

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these martial efforts. It was an unlikely troika that shaped Anne's policies, and Defoe—a man of no party—gave them a medium of public expression and served to lend the policies some semblance of coherence.

As the political fortunes of his patrons waned—Oxford for a time imprisoned in the Tower and Marlborough impeached and dismissed from the Queen's council—Defoe's income also waned, as would his sense of purpose. As Britain settled into political stability with the Hanoverian Succession (and the Union with Scotland, which Defoe championed, having come to pass), he had less of a role; moreover, because he had burned his bridges with the now-ascendant Whigs—with whom he should have had natural affinities—he had no hopes for preferment. He wound up his *Review* in 1714. He continued to invest in new schemes to obtain riches but only incurred ever-growing debt, attracting some very tenacious creditors who hounded him until his death (and surely hastened it). Yet the resourceful Defoe found new subjects to write about, including such practical manuals as *Conjugal Lewdness* which survive today only as antiquary material, and imaginary adventures and picaresque tales, a couple of which seem still fit to stand for the ages.

West concedes from the outset that his book should not be regarded as a critical biography, and, indeed, his discussion of Defoe's fiction is its least impressive feature, containing some charmingly appreciative commentary, but nonetheless relatively perfunctory. West is rightly skeptical about the heavy weather modern critics have made over *Robinson Crusoe*, and it is at least refreshing to be spared more allegorical readings. And unlike academic critics, at least those not disposed to retrospective politically inspired sneering, West is disarmingly irreverent to Defoe; though he doesn't mention it, he would have little patience with the pious reading of *Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* as modeled on Puritan spiritual autobiographies. For West, despite his great admiration, Defoe can be as hypocritical as his Moll. Characteristically, he scolds Defoe for what is usually forgotten about *Crusoe*: the whole premise for the adventure is the hero's participation in the slave trade, which Defoe himself hardly condemned but rather connived at and approved. As a pious Christian, Defoe should have known better.

As one would expect, West really comes alive in discussing Defoe's *Tour of Britain*. It is a singular merit of the biography to remind us how much pleasure can be found in this neglected work. West quotes generously from the book, sharing his own delight at the justness of many of Defoe's observations and the fine, clean sound of its plain English prose. He is also full of appreciation for Defoe's leg-pulling and indulgence in tall tales; in fact, the whole book is something of a fabrication, as Defoe made no such grand tour—though he had taken many trips over the years—and, as to many places described, he had probably never been to them, compiling descriptions from books he had consulted. Less charming are Defoe's prejudices—particularly his anti-Catholic bigotry—at which West allows himself no little irritation.

Defoe's curiosity, waggish sense of humor, and sure journalist's instinct for the compelling story to be conjured out of a mass of facts all make themselves abundantly felt in *A Tour*. Here is the coda to a passage in which Defoe offers a tale illustrating the sanguinary habits of justice in the North Country: it is said that once a woman riding into Halifax on market day, when executions took place, passed the chopping block and caught all unawares a head in her basket.

> All the use I shall make of this unlikely story, is this, that it seems executions were so frequent, that it was not thought a sight worth the peoples running out to see; that the woman should ride along so close to the scaffold, and that she should go on, and not so much as stop to see the ax fall, or take any notice of it. But these difficulties seem to be

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> much better solved, by saying, that tis reasonable to think that the whole tale is a little Yorkshire, which, I suppose, you will understand well enough.

Defoe did not live to see fame from his later writings. He died in 1731, alone, nearly penniless, hiding from creditors. It is good to be reminded of his vitality, his independence of mind and conscience, his intelligence and good sense, and that he "had written so variously and so well."

"Not a very loud voice"

Philip Ziegler Osbert Sitwell.
Chatto and Windus, 397 pages, £25

reviewed by Brooke Allen

One of the meanest and truest things that have been said about the Sitwells was F. R. Leavis's comment that they belong not so much to the history of literature as to the history of publicity. The three Sitwell siblings, Edith, born in 1887, Osbert, five years her junior, and Sacheverell, five years younger still and known to family and friends as Sachie, were among the earliest examples of that twentieth-century phenomenon, the person who is famous for being famous. In his gossipy and pleasantly readable new biography of Osbert Sitwell, Philip Ziegler estimates that at the height of Osbert's success, for every one person who had read his books there were ten who knew something of him and his family. Today the ratio would probably be more like one to a thousand. Most educated people know who Osbert Sitwell was, but you don't often see anyone curled up with one of his books, not even *Left Hand, Right Hand!*, the five-volume autobiography that was so extremely popular during the Forties and Fifties.

The cover design for the new biography is telling, for "Philip Ziegler" is printed in letters at least twice the size of those in "Osbert Sitwell." This is perhaps as it should be: Ziegler, the clever and graceful biographer of William IV, Melbourne, Diana Cooper, Mountbatten, Edward VIII, and Harold Wilson, has proved over the course of his career to be a far better writer than Sitwell ever was. Mediocre poetry and fiction, moderately amusing travel writing, light journalism, and autobiography: Sitwell's work has not stood the test of time. It is hard to credit that in his day some very intelligent people believed him to be one of the foremost writers of his generation. Today's readers are liable to be alienated by his work's aristocratic plumminess, what Ziegler aptly describes as its "clotted-cream lyricism," and to see the point of Michael Holroyd's complaint that "at its most elaborated and elongated his prose reads like that of Sir Thomas Browne, after being translated into French by Proust and subsequently rendered back into English by Henry James."

Ziegler is fully aware of his subject's second-rateness, and even admits to having at first doubted whether Osbert was worth a book. (He refers to him throughout as Osbert, not out of familiarity but to avoid confusing him with the other famous members of his family; I will follow suit.) "Often over the past few years," he says, "I have wondered if I were writing only for my own entertainment and for a handful of kindred spirits who are happy to grub around among such disregarded fossils. . . . Yet at the end, I am satisfied that Osbert *is* worth a book; not so much for what he did as for what he was."

England between the wars enjoyed a sort of literary silver age. Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Henry Green, Aldous Huxley, Anthony Powell, Christopher Isherwood, W. H. Auden, John Betjeman, Nancy Mitford, and Cyril Connolly were all in their heyday; they knew one another, corresponded, commented extensively on one another's work, characters, and sex lives. Osbert Sitwell was not a heavy hitter within this society, but he was one of its more colorful figures, pompous, bitchy,

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exhibitionistic, and a ready purveyor of scathing wit.

Ziegler cannot help liking Osbert, and treats him with an endearing protectiveness. For instance: "About halfway between the two world wars, Osbert found his poetic voice. It was not a very loud voice nor necessarily one well calculated to resound down the centuries, but it was individual, authentic, and in its own way curiously beguiling." While openly acknowledging Osbert's egotism, irritability, and snobbery ("Osbert attached immense importance to his royal connections. . . . [H]e never missed a chance to hobnob with royalty and rarely failed to refer to such intimacies when an opportunity arose or could be contrived"), it is clear that Ziegler became very fond of his subject during the course of his research.

Osbert was proud of his aristocratic ancestry, a fact of which anyone who has labored through the first volume of *Left Hand, Right Hand!* must be aware. It was indeed "imposing, if not quite so splendiferous as he, and still more his sister Edith, were accustomed to assert," writes Ziegler. The family had been landowners for over six hundred years; the magnificent but cold and gloomy family seat, Renishaw, was built in the seventeenth century. The family fortune came from manufacturing, a regrettable fact discreetly glossed over in *Left Hand, Right Hand!*; the baronetcy was a gift from the Prince Regent to an ancestor of Osbert's who rejoiced in the Wodehousian name of Sitwell Sitwell. On his mother's side Osbert was descended from the Dukes of Beaufort, hence from the Plantagenets: to Osbert and his siblings, this "was a subject of infinite satisfaction."

Osbert's father, Sir George Sitwell, was an eccentric, but not nearly so grotesque as the caricature in Osbert's autobiography. Thousands of readers laughed at Sir George as limned by Osbert, but "few," Ziegler writes, "stopped to consider what bitterness must lie behind this pillorying of a parent, or whether it was proper for a son to decry his father with such gusto." An egotist of gigantic proportions, selfish, tyrannical, and detached, Sir George could not have been an easy father, but then Osbert, as selfish as his father and far more malicious, was not an easy son. Kenneth Clark found Sir George "nicer and sadder than Osbert allowed in his ungenerous portrait"; Sachie wrote that "He wasn't nearly as comic a figure as [Osbert] made him appear. He was a much nicer person. I think he was much nicer than Osbert." Ziegler obviously shares Sachie's opinion, and deplores the large portion of Osbert's life that was wasted in pointless guerrilla warfare against a father who would dearly have liked to be his friend.

Osbert survived at Eton, but didn't shine; a contemporary remembered that "he spent most of his leisure at Westbrook's, the Eton florists, arranging flowers." He left in 1909, at the age of sixteen, unsure just what to do next. He expressed a tentative interest in the Diplomatic Service, but Sir George leaned more toward the military, and Osbert was sent to a crammer. He failed the entrance exam for Sandhurst ("in those days no easy matter," as he ruefully admitted), then failed it again. He eventually joined the XIth Hussars, but finding the cavalry uncongenial, for he detested horses, machinery, and guns, transferred to the Grenadier Guards. When war was declared in 1914 he went to France with his regiment.

Osbert's experiences in the trenches turned him into a lifelong pacifist. It was during the war that he began to write poetry, and it was war poetry very much in the spirit of what his friends Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were producing, though hardly of the same quality. "If not blazing a solitary trail," Ziegler writes with characteristic diffidence, "Osbert was at least in the forefront of the new poetic movement." Back in England, he honed his modernist credentials by attacking the so-called Georgian poets. Typically, Osbert the polemicist chose to ignore the many pieces of first-rate work which had been published in the *Georgian Poetry* volumes, and his clever modern dismissiveness did not find favor

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everywhere: Eliot, for example, expressed contempt for "the poets who consider themselves most opposed to Georgianism and who know a little French."

It was during World War I that the Sitwells began to operate as a team: to be precise, at a poetry reading in Lady Colefax's drawing-room in December, 1917. The cultivation of a group identity turned out to be a brilliant ploy. Each Sitwell in his own way was striking, but together they made an indelible impression. As the years wore on and their work and lives diverged, they would come to resent their corporate identity: in 1949 Edith scolded, "We do not like to be treated as if we were an aggregate Indian god, with three sets of legs and arms, but otherwise indivisible. We have all three suffered very much from this. It vulgarizes and cheapens everything and deprives all the work of its importance."

But as Ziegler demonstrates, they had no one to blame but themselves, and in their triumphant publicity tours to the United States after the Second World War—at about the same time Edith registered her complaint—they continued to capitalize on their attractions as a trio. There, Ziegler writes, "they were confident that they would give a good account of themselves but had some doubt whether the Americans were worthy of them and whether they would be properly appreciated." In the event, they were appreciated beyond their wildest expectations; they basked in the adulation.

Osbert was a homosexual of a masculine, repressed type. In youth, as an eligible bachelor, he had had a "nasty fright" when he was briefly pursued by Violet Keppel, later Violet Trefusis: "By Jove, I wish he'd accepted her!" her husband, Denis Trefusis, remarked when told of the incident many years later. Osbert was fearful and extremely circumspect about his sexuality, often registering his disapproval of those who came across as too gay. "Once he and Harold Nicolson were side by side filling in embarkation cards before a Channel crossing. 'What age are you going to put, Osbert?' asked Nicolson. 'What sex are *you* going to put, Harold?' Osbert retorted."

The person Osbert eventually chose as a life-companion was David Horner, a tall, beautiful young man of "corroding frivolity" a few years younger than himself, a junior member of the ancient Horner family of Mells Abbey. Horner had little money of his own, but had recently been left a fortune by an older friend. He banked the cash and lived more or less off Osbert until very nearly the end of their days, some forty years later. "If Osbert thought he was getting value for money," Ziegler writes rather stiffly, "and did not begrudge supporting the partner he loved, there is no reason a biographer should be more censorious." He can't help it, though: Horner, "a big gay butterfly, fluttering around and drawing honey from all the flowers," according to Osbert's secretary, emerges as the evil sprite of this story, a compulsive troublemaker who purposely did a great deal of damage to Osbert's relations with his siblings and his friends. He also, says Ziegler,

> reinforced Osbert's baser prejudices. He was a snob. . . . He was a racist. . . . He was an anti-Semite, of a violence which made Osbert's previous tendencies seem almost benevolent. His wit was almost invariably unkind. . . . His impatience and fretfulness were notorious. . . . All of these were frailties which Osbert shared and all of them became more marked as time wore on.

Sir George Sitwell died in 1943, and Osbert inherited the title and estates. "I *love* being a baronet," he gloated with characteristic frankness. "It's the most heavenly new toy." He also loved being in control of the family fortune, and rather unexpectedly—for he had been a life-long spendthrift—he managed it very well, leaving it in a substantially improved condition to his heir, Sachie's son Reresby, upon his own death twenty-six years later.

As early as 1949 he began to notice tremors in his hands, the first signs of Parkinson's disease, which was to blight his last

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years and turn the one-time dandy into a cripple pathetically dependent on the ministrations of others. Surprisingly, the irascible Osbert showed courage and real gallantry as the dreadful disease progressed. Travel, which had always been meat and drink to him, he kept up to the bitter end. "Getting in and out of gondolas will prove a difficult proposition," he told a friend, apropos a trip to Venice in 1967; "More amusing for bystanders than for me."

Osbert died in 1969. His career had been a triumph of willpower and oomph over the limitations set by mere talent. As a writer, he was never up to much, and although Ziegler claims that *Left Hand, Right Hand!* is an "unequivocal masterpiece," in my opinion he is very much mistaken. Perhaps his affection for Osbert has clouded his judgment. One of the attractive elements of this biography is the way that Ziegler tries and fails to repress his own emotional responses: his dislike of Edith, for example, his virulent distaste for David Horner, his almost perverse good will, in spite of all their faults, towards Sir George and Osbert.

For there is no doubt that Osbert was not a very admirable human being: even his closest friends felt, and were infected by, his constitutional malice. Siegfried Sassoon, who knew him extremely well, found it difficult to be his friend.

> Something in his character makes it impossible for me to feel kindly towards him. His neurotic spite and jealousy are ill-concealed by his 'social charm'. He seems incapable of serenity, or of tolerance of his contemporaries. His portrait should be a restless reflection in a valuable gilt Chippendale mirror. Peacock *en casserole* should be his staple diet. How tiresome he can be with his everlasting chatter about his antiquarian father; and his disreputably aristocratic mama; and his untidy financial affairs. Perhaps I am severe on him, but he is always merciless to everyone but himself and his brother and sister.

One feels that Osbert Sitwell must indeed have often been a tiresome person, and a treacherous one; it is Ziegler's considerable achievement to have made his biography funny, compelling, and even charming while never pretending that Osbert was more or better than he was.

A clean, well-lighted place

Victoria Newhouse
Towards a New Museum.
The Monacelli Press,
288 pages, $45 paper

reviewed by Mildred F. Schmertz

The architectural historian Victoria Newhouse, by choosing mid-to-late-twentieth-century art museums as her subject, is telling a bigger story about architecture in the United States and Europe than her selection of building type might first suggest. To design an art museum is the preeminent architectural challenge today, not only because museums are such important symbols of our cultural aspirations, but also because they are immensely difficult to do well. The forty-four built museums described and evaluated by Newhouse, and the many others she refers to more briefly, constitute a superb account of the best work of the best architects of our era. Since no comparable book exists, it is fortunate for both the reader and for the historical record that she describes each museum so carefully. Only after discussing its reason for being, the organization of its functions, its site, landscaping, structure, dimensions, materials, and colors does she step back to offer critical assessment.

Newhouse begins with a brief history of the development of private collections, an activity that has gone on since antiquity. At first art objects and other treasures were secreted away in tombs, temples, and crypts. The earliest private art museums were the portrait galleries that began to appear in English and French country houses and castles at the beginning of the sixteenth-century. Simultaneously, in Italy,

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small studios for the contemplation of art appeared in a few of the grander palaces. Soon, throughout Europe, cabinets of curiosities—assortments of odd and strange objects of nature, as well as works of art—began to cram closets and cover the walls of rooms the aristocracy set aside for such acquisitions. Gardens, enhanced by summerhouses, loggias, pavilions, and grottoes became the settings for collections of antique sculpture. By the end of the sixteenth century, such aristocratic collectors as the Hapsburg Ferdinand II began to separate their art from other treasures and build distinct galleries for it.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the merely rich, as well as the aristocracy, were commissioning architects to house their collections. Many of these buildings, once designed for private use, have or will become public. Others from the outset were intended for the public. Newhouse includes twelve twentieth-century collector's museums, most notably the Menil Collection in Houston (1987) by the Genoese architect Renzo Piano, this year's Pritzker Prize winner. She finds much to praise in the architecture of the Menil and other relatively small, private, collector-inspired and directed art museums:

> With a single client and no board of trustees or staff to deal with, the architect's task is simplified; the existence of a strong collection to which the architect can design is also an asset. Where no such collection is in place, museum architecture almost always fails. Clearly formed ideas—usually one person's—of what and how art should be viewed, and reaction against operational aspects of public musums, have generally resulted in private museums matching art and architecture most successfully.

The late Dominique de Menil was a patron and collector with very clearly formed ideas of how art should be viewed. At the time that she engaged Renzo Piano, her collection included more than ten thousand works of art. De Menil determined that only 10 percent was to be exhibited to the public at any one time, with the rest stored in a rooftop penthouse, her "treasure chamber," designed as an efficient and pleasant space for curators and scholars. The public galleries were to have natural illumination modulated by weather and the time of day. Piano's simple sixteen-foot-high spaces, which admit daylight through a sophisticated but unobtrusive ceiling and roof system, are bounded by smooth, white wall surfaces with black-stained pine floors. These galleries serve her heterogenous, frequently rotated collection quietly and well.

Single-artist museums, like those built for private collections, have contents that can be focused in settings that are almost residential in scale. Ideally they should contain all the artist's available completed work, as well as the sketches or models that led to it, displayed in spaces that approximate the artist's working environment. "If successful," writes Newhouse, "this museum type enshrines the artist and illuminates the output, providing a chapel-like setting animated by the dynamic relationships between objects."

As single-artist museums are relatively rare in the United States, Newhouse found only two of interest for her book—Richard Gluckman's Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh (1994) and Renzo Piano's Cy Twombly Gallery in Houston (1995). The former is housed in a 1920s warehouse. "Given that Warhol used mass-production techniques and called one of his studios the Factory," she notes, "the warehouse museum is an apt replication of his famed workplace."

The author finds Piano's Italianate pavilion for Twombly appropriate because, she says, the artist's "refined scribbles and abstract calligraphy are grounded in the Classical past," and because he has spent a major portion of his life in Rome. Although some may not consider Twombly classical, or even good, and might have difficulty associating his work with Rome, Piano's elegant formal arrangement of rectangular gallery spaces is well proportioned to the

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paintings, and once again, as in the Menil, the architect has devised a ceiling of soft luminescence that does as much as possible for the art.

The six other single-artist museums included in the book are all in Europe. The Hans Josephsohn Museum in Giornico, Switzerland (1992) by Peter Märkli is one of unusual interest. The Swiss sculptor Josephsohn is a seventy-eight-year-old German Jew, orphaned by the Nazis, who took refuge in Zurich. "His life," according to Newhouse, "is reflected in the alienation of his bronzes: human figures that convey a sense of metaphysical discomfort."

Märkli built, in the beautiful Alpine foothills of the upper Ticino district, three interconnected rectangular halls of raw concrete, extending 138 feet along the edge of a hayfield. These halls are quite narrow, as the sculptures in the form of reliefs or half figures need not be seen in the round. Roofed by skylights, they are without electricity, water, climate control, shops, and security. For Newhouse this museum is simple as a Barnett Newman painting is simple. Although the museum is remote and hard to reach, approximately three hundred visitors a month find their way to it—mostly European and American student groups. "What is remarkable about this," the author explains, "is that Josephsohn is not a world-class artist, nor is Märkli's architecture, on its own, so extraordinary. Rather, it is the two together that provide the powerful aesthetic—even spiritual—experience."

Although Newhouse offers only minor reservations about most of the private-collector and single-artist museums, she becomes sharply critical in the chapter "Wings That Don't Fly." Here she inveighs against art museums that are too big and the additions that she believes are making them even worse:

> The lack of architectural integrity that is characteristic of so many expansion projects is unexpected in institutions that stand for the highest standards of art preservation and connoisseurship. The redundant enlargement projects undertaken between 1984 and 1987 by New York City's four major art museums—the Metropolitan Museum (whose Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, like the other museums' enlargements, was for 20th-century art), MOMA, the Guggenheim and, in its first, unrealized effort, the Whitney—as well as Paris's Louvre, all sacrificed architecture to expansion.

Well, all did, but not in every case as egregiously as Newhouse charges. In her view, the Metropolitan has not much left but its art. Referring to additions that began with the 1970 master plan of Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates and that continue under Roche's direction to this day, the author declares that "little significant architecture survives, and with the latest five-wing addition the museum has lost all sense of place and procession. Equally disorienting is an unfortunate mixture of art and commerce created by the insertion of sales counters at critical points throughout the building." A walk through the museum guided by the visitors' map, however, reveals that the designed expansions extend or reinforce earlier processional axes and create new ones. Nor are the shops disorienting. They orient very well, their placement at exhibition exits a signal that one has come to the end of the show and it is time to buy the related catalog, book, video, poster, or T-shirt.

By the time the first major additions were all completed, Newhouse observes, twenty years had passed and "the architects' monumental, geometric glass-and-steel aesthetic was hopelessly outdated." Hopelessly? Architectural styles disappear and return, modified and transformed, with new labels. Today, Roche's glass enclosures look quite contemporary—neo-modernist even.

Not all museums, however, have lost their architecture in the act of expanding. Newhouse gathers the extensions she considers successful under the title "Wings That Fly": that is, "innovative statement[s] that leave the original building intact." Included

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here are the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven (1953) by Louis I. Kahn and the Staatsgalerie New Building and Chamber Theater in Stuttgart (1983) by James Stirling, Michael Wilford and Associates.

Newhouse places all the art museums not designed for individual private collections, the work of single artists, or as extensions of existing museums, in one of three typological categories, a chapter for each: "The Museum as Sacred Space," "The Museum as Entertainment," and "The Museum as Environmental Art." To help explain "sacred" museum space, she quotes from Carol Duncan's book *Civilizing Rituals* (1955):

> Just as images of saints were, by example, supposed to trigger in the initiated a quest for spiritual transcendence, so in the museum, art objects focus and organize the viewer's attention, activating by their very form an inner spiritual or imaginative act. The museum setting, immaculately white and stripped of all distracting ornament, promotes this intense concentration.

She also quotes the German artist Georg Baselitz's rejection of architects' efforts to integrate the design of galleries with the kind of art to be exhibited, and his call for nonintrusive space: "high walls, few doors, no side windows, light from above, no partitions, no baseboards, no base molding, no paneling, no shiny floors and finally, no colors either."

Newhouse contends that architects attempting to achieve such space today frequently fail or at best achieve mixed results. "Sacred museum space," she argues, "originated in another era for a different kind of art from today's: it is difficult to resurrect a style that belongs to the past." Nevertheless, she admires Steven Holl's almost completed Kiasma Museum for Contemporary Art in Helsinki, a building that aspires to be a sacred temple of art. Holl has designed the interiors to be silent and serene—to contrast effectively with boldly expressive art, or to be in the spirit of art that is calm.

Although she believes that "sacred space" has become with a few exceptions a thing of the past, the art museum as a place for play as well as pedagogy has long been with us:

> To think of art in terms of entertainment is simply a return to the astonishment and delight associated with the first private Renaissance museums; a sensuous, thought-provoking discovery quite different from the dutiful didacticism of most large contemporary institutions where people often spend more time reading about the art than looking at it.

Newhouse favors the museum as entertainment just so long as the fun doesn't get in the way of the art. Thus she unsparingly quotes the director of the Museum of Modern Art, Glenn Lowry, who "pictured the future of his venerable institution as a scene from the Marx Brothers' *A Night at the Opera*: 'a loud cacophonous environment in which fun is had by all.'" This is not the sort of entertainment Newhouse has in mind.

She also faults I. M. Pei & Partners for closing the Louvre's former separate entrances to its wings and replacing them by the single point of access through the glass pyramid, connected to an underground circulation system lined by shops. "You don't enter a palace through its basement or via a shopping mall," she admonishes, but today, at the Louvre, you do.

Newhouse considers the J. Paul Getty Center, Los Angeles (1997), designed by Richard Meier & Partners, to be a modern-day Xanadu of entertainment, and it is. She predicts that this minicity, perched like an acropolis on a 110-acre site at the top of one of the Santa Monica foothills, will be visited as much for its marvelous views as for its art. The art museum itself is one of six buildings devoted to conservation, art education, electronic art information, grants and research, and the only one open to the public. It is an assortment of pavilions, beautifully proportioned inside and out, separated at the ground level by tree-filled courtyards and above by balconies, rooftop terraces, and staircases that overlook intri-

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cately composed Le Corbusian segments of the building as well as the surrounding hills.

There is much aesthetic pleasure at the Getty for those who admire the felicity of Meier's variations on Le Corbusian modernism. The fun stops, however, in the galleries decorated by the New York-based French architect Thierry Despont, and in the garden assigned to the conceptual artist Robert Irwin. The museum trustees, perversely, invited Despont to devise rich and elaborate traditional rooms for the decorative arts galleries, as well as period wall fabrics for some of the fine arts galleries. "Fake containers," Newhouse writes, "for real contents." The trustees, backward-looking in their choice of Despont, descended into fatuous trendiness in their choice of Irwin, who created a garden that deliberately disrupts and violates Meier's aesthetic. "Having committed itself initially to a classic Modern architect," Newhouse writes, "the Getty Trust gradually allowed its commitment to erode. By imposing Despont, Meier's Modernism was overshadowed by academic historicism. By bringing in Irwin, Meier's orthogonal landscaping was confused by an intervention equally at odds with it."

Newhouse brings her book to a close with an essay on the art museum as environmental art. In this category are works by Peter Eisenman, Wolf Prix, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Frank Gehry. Although each has his own vocabulary, taken together they are creating museum architecture which the author believes to be not only genuinely new but also the current standard. For Newhouse, Gehry is indisputably the leader of this latest avant-garde with his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (1997). She finds the galleries to be "among the most evocative forms ever made." In her judgment, much of the art selected for the inaugural exhibition—works by Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Beuys, and Jenny Holzer—effectively holds its place, and strongly interacts with Gehry's computer-generated curvilinear volumes.

Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, and Richard Serra, among others in the inaugural, created art in response to Gehry's forms. Yet while Newhouse expects and hopes that the Bilbao Guggenheim and the other new architecture-dominated museums will become catalysts for new art, what of the artists who don't wish to be inspired or controlled by the container? Or those who may resent the hubris of museum directors and architects who challenge them to dance to the tune of new architecture? Such artists prefer that architecture surround their art invisibly. May they prevail.

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Letter from Moscow

An opacity of hopelessness

by Christian Caryl

The most notable cultural emblem of 1990s Russia rises from an island in the middle of the Moscow River. Peter the Great stands 196 feet tall. His feet, spread wide, are planted on a base of buildings that look as though they might have been stamped from lumps of dough. Even more incongruously, they fill the hull of an enormous sailing ship whose prow juts out across the water. In one hand, Peter holds a tiller; in the other, he holds aloft a golden scroll. The ship stands on a thick column, bulky as a baobab, from which the bows of other ships protrude. Their bowsprits support metal flags, crossed with diagonal bands of gold, that pivot in the breeze.

The statue has drawn a lot of attention. Completed last year at a cost of $20 million, it was commissioned by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and built by his court sculptor, a maneuverable Georgian by the name of Zurab Tsereteli. Many people in Moscow hate the thing. For a while several gallery owners, eloquently invoking their newly acquired democratic rights, talked loudly about collecting signatures for a referendum on the statue's removal. None of those plans ever went beyond the talking stage, though, and the word these days is that the mayor quietly salved the ire of his opponents by awarding them lucrative city contracts. If Moscow were the kind of place where honesty is rewarded, one could argue that the mayor was merely exercising a democratic right of his own. So far, however, no one has dared to make that observation.

There are, in fact, fairly important things that haven't been said about this statue of Peter the Great. Critics usually describe it as ugly and much too large, at jarring odds with the urban fabric of the city that surrounds it. The statue's supporters just as predictably argue that it is beautiful and just the right size, an exemplar of the accessible, assertive, "patriotic" art of the type that irritates avant-garde intellectuals and tickles ordinary folk. Yet that does rather miss the point. After all, there are plenty of other figures from Russian history who have been claimed by "patriots" at one time or another. So why precisely Peter? Why not Catherine the Great or Nicholas II or Joseph Stalin? For that matter, why not Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn? After all, Russia is supposed to be a democracy now. The ruthlessly modernizing emperor, the autocrat who opened Russia to the West to make it strong rather than democratic—what an odd symbol for the mayor to choose.

A few months ago, idly channel-surfing Russian TV on a late Sunday afternoon, I happened upon what seemed at first to be a documentary rehash of the 1917 revolutions, flickering footage of marching proletarians and swaying banners. Then something in the accompanying commentary caught my attention. After the Communist takeover, the voiceover intoned, "economic

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performance needed decades to get back to the level of 1913. . . . And another lesson taught by that experience was this: Russia must depend only on itself. The West will always see in it only a competitor, a rival, dangerous and unpredictable."

Then, rather disconcertingly, the broadcast cut to its real subject: a portrait of a modern-day Russian businessman by the name of Vladimir Dovgan. Mr. Dovgan is a curious case. A former championship athlete, he has built himself a formidable foodstuff empire by turning his face into Russia's most conspicuous trademark. If a product bears his picture and his name, he tells Russian consumers, then its quality is assured. But it was in his self-assigned role as a guardian of the national spirit that Mr. Dovgan was now appearing on TV.

First he launched into a diatribe about the naïveté of Russians who welcomed humanitarian aid from the West at the beginning of this decade. Though the Westerners claimed they were trying to help the Russian economy, he said, this was obviously complete "nonsense." "The people who came here were cruel fighters with a very simple goal: to destroy and to kill by any means possible." Western investors, he insisted, only came to Russia to close down factories they were afraid would be competitors. But Mr. Dovgan's remedy for such ills went far beyond the ordinary rhetoric of protectionism. "Today we need a national idea. We can save our industry, our economy, only if we can unify Russians. You have to explain to people that every time they buy cheap, beautifully packaged chicken from America, they're closing down jobs in a factory here somewhere."

And then the broadcast shifted back to the glorious past by citing an aristocratic adviser to Tsar Nicholas II: "The interests of the trading and industrial class always coincide with that policy which ensures the healthy power of the state." After a meaningful pause, a voiceover continued the thought: "Isn't it time that we stopped listening to Western advisers and started listening to our own Russian ones?"

To those who have only been following events in Russia from afar, Mr. Dovgan's plea for a "national ideology" based on a muscular, paranoid version of capitalism must come as something of a shock. After all, the conventional view of Russia for most of the 1990s depicts a country in the grip of a Manichean struggle between the forces of darkness and light—loosely speaking, between those who are against reform and those who are for it. Earlier in the decade it was a fight between Communists and democrats, which seemed clear enough. With time, though, the battle lines have become increasingly blurred. Most recently the opponents have been cast as "oligarchs" (evil schemers who control both the media and most of the economy) and "young reformers" in the government (heroic thirty- or forty-something liberal capitalists like Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov). Mr. Dovgan, by the way, has been the subject of several adoring portraits by American journalists enraptured by his "young capitalist" style.

Underlying such simplistic schemes is the central assumption evoked by the more optimistic adherents of globalization: liberal capitalism is based on a plurality of actors, a reduced role for the state, and a free flow of information. Hence free elections, free markets, and a free press go hand in hand, and the "path" that leads in that direction is none other than the inevitable path of progress. It's a beautiful idea. It may run entirely counter to common sense, and there may be plenty of examples to the contrary, but it's certainly beautiful. It has, in any case, little to do with Russia and its future.

Take, for example, Yuri Luzhkov, the enterprising Moscow mayor and the man who picked Peter the Great as his avatar. Mr. Luzhkov has to qualify as one of the most amazing success stories of Yeltsin's Russia. Once a mid-level bureaucrat in the Moscow party hierarchy, today the mayor is one of the most powerful men in Russia and is widely considered a leading candidate in the race to succeed President Yeltsin. It's often

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forgotten today that Mr. Luzhkov attained his office in the wake of a "liberal democrat" named Gavriil Popov who said lots of great-sounding things about building a new society from the ruins of Communism but proved incapable of delivering the most basic city services. Under Mr. Luzhkov, the city has boomed. His government fills potholes, collects garbage, and makes sure that pensions and wages get paid on time—none of which can be regarded as self-evident in the rest of Russia. Capitalism, by all appearances, is flourishing: shops are full, the city's gigantic outdoor markets hum with activity, construction sites abound. Mr. Luzhkov's critics like to dismiss his success by pointing out that he can rely on tax revenues from the foreign investors and the domestic banks and industries that gravitate, disproportionately, to the capital. One might reply by asking why Mr. Popov, his predecessor, failed to extract any benefit from similar conditions. One could also point out that the government of President Yeltsin has been distinguished by its singular failure to collect taxes from the country at large.

Whatever the reasons for this success, though, one thing is indisputable: it has made Mr. Luzhkov hugely popular among his constituents. In the last Moscow mayoral election they returned him to office with well over 90 percent of the vote, and no one who has spent any period of time in the city will dispute that the mayor's program has the genuine and heartfelt approval of Muscovites from all walks of life. And, like any successful political program, it has ideological underpinnings that deserve some scrutiny. This is ironic when one considers that Mr. Luzhkov goes out of his way to disavow ideology. His favorite self-description is "pragmatist," and he has worked hard to create an image as a political neutral whose only program is getting the job done. He has assiduously positioned himself between the Scylla of Communist central planners and the Charybdis of those perceived to be "radical" free-market Westernizers like Mr. Chubais. Such a strategy makes perfect sense when one considers how thoroughly most ideologies have been discredited in Russia. That it strikes a chord with Russians outside of Moscow is demonstrated by the eagerness of many other regional leaders to follow the mayor's lead and present themselves in the same practically minded light.

In fact, though, Mr. Luzhkov's "pragmatism" is far from value-free. It has some definite ideological principles, all of which derive from an instinctual reading of the failures of the Russian political elite over the past ten years. First, it is not particularly democratic. "Getting the job done," it turns out, implies pushing aside all those inconvenient hindrances of democratic decision-making. The city government and parliament are tightly controlled by the mayor's machine and their workings are anything but transparent. The Moscow police force is notorious for its carefree attitude about human rights. Journalists, who know from experience that the mayor can make life unpleasant for them in a variety of subtle ways, whisper whenever his name comes up.

Second, his pragmatism is stridently nationalistic. Again and again Mr. Luzhkov has reaffirmed, in the strongest of terms, Russian claims to Sevastopol, the strategically important Black Sea naval base that now belongs to Ukraine. Under his urging the Moscow city government even found money to build apartments for Russian sailors there. In his pursuit of closer ties with Alexander Lukashenko, the fascistoid dictator of Belarus, the mayor has been far more boosterish and far less critical than the Yeltsin government, which has tended to waver on the issue. And in recent months Mr. Luzhkov has found another patriotic cause in the predicament of ethnic Russians in the Baltic states. The mayor even compared Latvia's treatment of its Russians (who are now, horror of horrors, expected to learn the language of the country before they can become citizens there) to the Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot.

Third, and most important, Mr. Luzh-

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kov is decidedly pro-capitalist. About this there can be no question. Mr. Luzhkov may flirt a lot with the Communists, and is careful not to criticize their leaders too loudly for fear of appearing too "ideological," but he shows few signs of desiring the wholesale return of central planning or the renationalization of industry. The best evidence of Mr. Luzhkov's fundamentally pro-market inclinations is Moscow itself, which has thrived so ostentatiously under his reign. The question that must be asked next is how well this inclination to the market squares with his equally clear tendency to authoritarianism. In short, what kind of capitalism does Mr. Luzhkov stand for? And what kind of capitalism would the mayor—and, by extension, his voters—like to see in Russia as a whole?

Alexei Balabanov's 1997 film *Brat* ("Brother") tells the cryptic story of Danil Bogrov, a demobilized soldier confronting the dispiriting prospects of life in the Russian countryside. No sooner has Danil returned home than he gets into a scrape with the law; his mother declares Danil a failure and goads him to head off to St. Petersburg, where his brother, the archetype of everything a son should be, has struck it rich. Danil follows her advice—only to discover that his brother has actually made his fortune in the big city as a contract killer. At first, circumstances seem to conspire against our hero. His brother, cool and cosmopolitan, arranges for Danil to take his place as the executor of a gangland killing that he, the brother, knows will go awry. He even cheats Danil on the fee. But, to our surprise, Danil rises to the task; not only does he dispatch the rival mobster and his bodyguards, he even manages to survive the subsequent set-up with only a flesh wound. Danil then proves unexpectedly competent in this new line of work; he seems to have learned a thing or two in the army.

Yet even as the violence of the film escalates to an almost surreal level, Danil manages to retain a kind of malevolent artlessness. We can never quite make up our minds whether he's a good soul twisted into badness or a psychopath with a soft spot. He protects a small merchant in the local market against racketeers. Lying in ambush with a pair of fellow hit men, he ends up saving the life of an innocent witness who blunders into the apartment. (How? By whacking his two edgy accomplices.) He avenges the beating of a girlfriend by knee-capping the husband who abused her (misguidedly, it turns out; she rejects Danil out of sympathy with her injured abuser). In the end, completing his transformation from victim to avenger, he even rescues his own brother (now reduced to a blubbering wreck) by killing the thugs who have kidnapped and tortured him. It is a kind of redemption; Danil, forgiving all his brother's intrigues against him, calms him down and sends him back to their village to lead a quiet life.

What is striking about the film, though, is just how unrevolutionary Danil's retribution is. It's a matter of beating the gangsters at their own game. For one thing, he seems to kill with real pride in his work; he never really objects to his new profession as such. Nor does Danil seem to have any objections to capitalism per se. He may look like a social avenger, but he's too much of a conscientious consumer to be a real Robin Hood. He uses some of his blood money to buy himself a nice stereo and more of his favorite CDs. It's clear that he wants a good life for himself. In a brilliantly twisted ending, Danil, discreetly packing his sawed-off shotgun, heads off for Moscow—where, as his brother has told him, the really big fortunes are to be made.

Brother is a hugely popular film, and it has become a cult classic among younger Russians, who, to a disturbing degree, identify with the hero. Some critics have seen him as a proto-fascist, and, while it's true that Danil is not particularly fond of Jews or Chechens, his relations to French- and English-speaking foreigners, even though he can't speak their languages, are more or less cordial; nowhere does he seem espe-

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cially "patriotic," be it in word or deed. But the one place where the film unquestionably overlaps with the experience of its viewers is in its richly ambiguous evocation of victimhood and vengeance. The emotion one encounters most often when traveling among Russians today is an almost hysterical sense of *obizhennost*, "insultedness" or "offendedness." Russians of all walks of life talk obsessively about how their country is being robbed, degraded, denigrated, destroyed—even when their own individual standards of living are fine or improving. Such resentment is often cast as nostalgia for the old order, an inexplicable longing for restoration of the Communist regime. This view, however, is highly debatable. Communism is not mourned, for example, but the Soviet Union is; its collapse divided families, and not only Russian ones. The decline in living standards often acquires surreal dimensions (factory employees who receive their wages in coffins or condoms). Every institution, from the army to the university, is in ruins. One does not have to be a Communist sympathizer to feel the effect, and Danil encounters it at every turn.

One could argue, indeed, that many Russians (especially younger ones) are like Danil. They aren't revolutionaries, but they are deeply resentful of a "market economy" that spawns racketeers rather than merchants. Anatoly Chubais, the reformer loved by the West, is easily the most hated man in Russia today—but this is not, as some earnest Western journalists would assure us, because he is a symbol of "reform." It's because the privatization schemes authored by Mr. Chubais have been scandalously and systemically unfair, fantastically enriching a handful of tycoons and leaving most people struggling to eat. As one Muscovite recently told me, "There were three moments in this century when my family lost everything: after the Revolution of 1918, after collectivization in the 1930s, and after the Chubais privatization in 1995."

When ordinary Russians express wildly paranoid views of Western and American involvement in their country, it's at least in part because they have seen how the West has consistently praised Boris Yeltsin for instituting policies that, for most people, deny opportunities rather than create them. The myth of Russian collectivism is precisely that, a myth. Most Russians these days would be perfectly happy to run their own businesses. But most do not, dissuaded by the corruption and the racketeers and the unpredictability of laws—the salient products of "the market economy" as it exists in Russia today. The search for utopias is over—and in Russia that applies to liberal democracy as well as to Communism.

This is a strange moment in Russia's history. The past, as demonstrated by the conundrum of how to bury the last Tsar, appears as a forbidding maze of dead ends; the present is an opacity of hopelessness. It is a time laden with possible futures. Everyone, it seems, is searching. Mainstream newspapers publish plans for coups in the name of economic reform. In St. Petersburg a man opens a "School of Free Market Patriotism" designed to educate the future business elite in the spirit of the medieval hero Dmitri Donskoi. Magnates talk openly about strengthening their control over the president in the national interest. Boris Nemtsov, supposedly a pro-Western "young reformer," proposes recovering Sevastopol by colonizing it with Russian businessmen. Alexander Lebed, the newly elected governor of Krasnoyarsk Territory and another presidential front-runner, ruminates over the fate of Pinochet, who introduced the free market at gunpoint in Chile. The Dovgans and the Luzhkovs offer their own versions of capitalism: feudalist, corporatist, or rampant. There are other visions of the future, of course. But it will be interesting to see what will happen when, or whether, Danil Bogrov finally reaches the city of his dreams.

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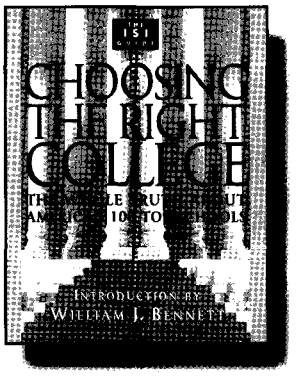

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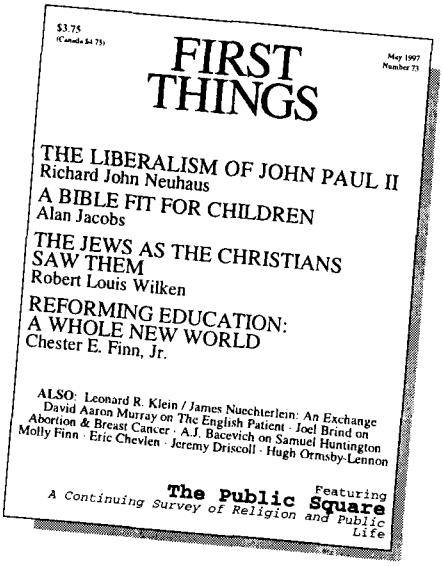
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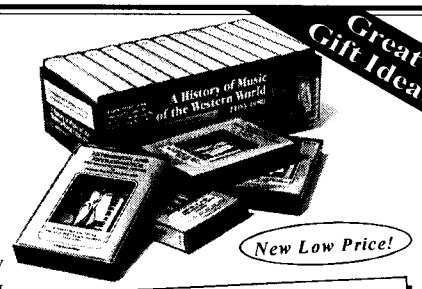

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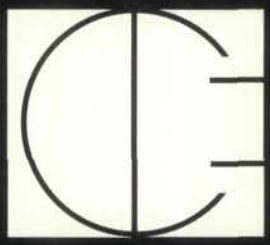

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